

HURRICANE FLOYD STRIKES

Region hunkers down, waits for storm's punch

From staff reports

As Hurricane Floyd approached the coast of Southeastern North Carolina, the Morning Star dispatched Wednesday morning reporters and photographers to various counties in the region. Here is their report:

NEW HANOVER

By 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Wrightsville Beach was empty, except for those doing last-minute preparations.

Outside Vito's Pizzeria, owner Don Wombles and his son Jack waited until the last minute because they were being optimistic.

"Fran was bad enough, I don't want to even see this one," Jack said. The Wombles live in Porters Neck and were planning to evacuate to Greensboro.

Jack said he works at Crocker's Marine, where employees pulled boats out of the water Tuesday.

The Wombles were boarding up the restaurant and putting sandbags in front of the doors of the Lumina Avenue pizzeria. Mary Ann and Billy Manger, owners of Circles Garden Deli and Ice Cream, were lifting off the floor and boarding up.

"I'm more nervous about tornadoes than the hurricane itself," Mrs. Manger said.

Wrightsville Beach is under a 10 p.m. curfew until further notice. The town was bracing for the worst.

"It's going to damage this beach like we have not seen since Hazel," Public Information Officer Michael Stokes said.

Rob Alford, another Wrightsville Beach resident, never rides out the storm and does not want to this time. But Wednesday, Mr. Alford was having a problem leaving the island. His brother borrowed his car Tuesday morning and was not let back into Wrightsville Beach.

"They won't let him come back - even though they know his brother is stranded," Mr. Alford said.

"I don't want to stay. I like comfort and air conditioning," he said. "I had two roommates who stayed during Bonnie and they said they would never do it again. They thought

they were going to die."

Further south on Carolina Beach, the only action early Wednesday afternoon was at the Exxon station on Lake Park Boulevard where people were gassing up. On the boardwalk, police on foot checked businesses to make sure people had evacuated.

BRUNSWICK

As rain poured down on Brunswick County Wednesday, the predictions for Hurricane Floyd were grim.

Nearly 5 inches of rain had fallen by midday.

Sheriff Ronald Hewett and Cecil Logan, director of emergency management for Brunswick County, agreed that mandatory evacuation of the beach communities was going well.

"More people have left for this than for Bonnie and Dennis put together," Mr. Logan said. "We have people evacuating that haven't ever evacuated before."

A countywide curfew was scheduled for 10 p.m. Sheriff Hewett doubled patrols in the areas that were evacuating.

Mr. Logan looked to the bright spot of the timing of the storm, noting that most farmers had harvested their crops and most of the turtles had been hatched.

"There is a lot of water," Mr. Logan said. "Road systems will definitely be bad. He explained the ditches are already full and the water table was up before the rains of the past couple of days.

"That much water on the ground, with the wind, will uproot trees, power poles and signs. That's what we're concerned about," he said.

In the Southport-Oak Island area of Brunswick County, officials and residents were making last-minute preparations. At the Hannaford supermarket on Long Beach Road, Steve Smith, and Gene Martin bought two 24-packs of Coors Lite.

Long lines of last-minute shoppers clogged the aisles at the store Wednesday. Mr. Martin and Mr. Smith, Southport residents, were on their way to a 45-foot commercial fishing boat they plan to stay on during the storm. Mr. Martin said during hurricanes he takes the boat to the Yellow Banks area of the Intracoastal Waterway. The men will stay there,

protected by 30-foot banks, until the storm is over, Mr. Martin said.

"We'll be in a big ditch," he said.

Another shopper, Tim Soles of Oak Island, planned to stay at a friend's house on the island across the street from the ocean.

In Sunset Beach, town officials planned to tie off its pontoon bridge and cut off utilities to the island by 3 p.m.

The town of Shallotte issued an 8 p.m. curfew for today. To re-enter, residents will need proof of residency which can include bills, tax receipts or driver's licenses.

Holden Beach Mayor Jim Lowell reported no problems with evacuation. Mr. Lowell planned to stay at his business, The Bookworm.

"I'll be a little closer to things but that doesn't mean I'll be an idiot and stick my neck out in it," he said.

PENDER

As heavy rains from the outer bands of Hurricane Floyd began lashing Surf City, residents of the Topsail Island community hastened to finish storm preparations before fleeing to the mainland.

Surf City, like the other two communities on the island, was under a mandatory evacuation order Wednesday afternoon.

At Henning's Outdoor Sports, Steve Bailey and Scott Madler were busy moving the last of 60 kayaks down the street to a covered garage.

They had only tied the boats down and left them outside for Dennis.

"Floyd's a real storm," Mr. Bailey said. "Dennis was a little cup of wind."

COLUMBUS

Bracing for a direct hit from Hurricane Floyd, Columbus County officials in Whiteville declared a state of emergency about midday Wednesday.

Communities along the Waccamaw River already were experiencing flooding and residents headed to emergency shelters set up at five county schools.

County emergency operations staff, worried that the storm's predicted path had the storm making landfall near Myrtle Beach, S.C., and cutting inland into Colleton County at the state line.

"We're just expecting the worst," said John Moore, county emergency services director.

ONSLOW

Onslow officials ordered a mandatory evacuation of North Topsail Beach and all other low-lying areas Wednesday morning and began urging residents to shelter outside of the county.

A curfew has been set for Onslow County through today.

Officials opened 12 shelters in Onslow County, including seven that will be manned by local officials. Those shelters will not be furnished with cots or other basic necessities.

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Area wide

At 1 p.m. Wednesday, utility companies were bracing the storm but had no reported power outages.

Carolina Power & Light mobilized an initial force of 7,000 power restoration workers. The crews will stay close to the impacted areas as possible to begin work early afterward. Crews are coming from as far away as Miami and New York with the help of other utility companies.

Four County Electric Membership Cooperative, Brunswick Electric Membership Corp. also had extra generators on standby.

The U.S. Coast Guard evacuated their Oak Island and Wrightsville Beach stations Wednesday afternoon.

Staff writers Brian Feagans, Bettie Fennell, Stacey Gareth McGrath, Tommy Perkins, Mike Ramsey, Cori Amy Turnbull, Tricia Vance and CeCe VonKolnitz and correspondent Misti C. Lee contributed to this report.