

YOUR TURN

mikejohnson

From: mikejohnson [mikejohnson@co.southampton.state.va.us]

Sent: Tuesday, September 20, 2011 1:26 PM

To: 'Gwen Albers'

Subject: Your Turn

Gwen,

It may be a few words over the limit, but I hope you'll consider running the attached for me under the "Your Turn" column.

Best regards,
Mike

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The View from behind the Scenes

Michael Johnson, County Administrator

As the appointed Director of Emergency Services under the *Southampton County Emergency Operations Plan*, I have a unique perspective on the inner workings of response to natural disasters. My role is pretty easy - make sure that we have a written plan, officially declare a state of local emergency, and then get out of the way and let the dedicated employees and volunteers of Southampton County do their jobs.

On Friday, August 26 at precisely 7:00 a.m., I did just that. The National Hurricane Center warned that we were potentially in the crosshairs of Irene's wrath. With expectations of sustained tropical storm force winds and torrential rainfall, the National Weather Service in Wakefield advised us that Irene could potentially wreak every bit as much havoc as Isabel did in 2003. Not a pleasant experience, as you may recall. So I did what I'm supposed to do – I signed the Declaration of Local Emergency and set the wheels of our adopted plan into motion.

What happened next are the many things that so often go unnoticed or are quickly forgotten. And that's a shame – because the sacrifice and commitment of dozens of public employees and volunteers is truly commendable and worthy of recognition. Putting their personal and family safety aside, these men and women responded like the dedicated public servants that they are, without complaint.

This is what I saw from behind the scenes. I saw our Information Technology Director working late into the night before the storm made landfall, making sure that all of our records were fully backed up and safely tucked away. I saw our Department of Utilities making sure that the elevated water tanks were topped off, the generators were fueled and treatment plants fully staffed. I saw them arrange for portable generators to be brought in for public water systems without auxiliary power, and later respond to brief water service interruptions in Drewryville and Edgehill.

I saw our Department of Social Services set up and manage multiple shifts of shelter operations at Southampton High School without a hitch. They were supported by the Virginia Department of Health, the Southampton County Sheriff's Office and the administration and staff of Southampton County Public Schools. I saw our Buildings & Grounds staff make sure that storm evacuees had a cot to sleep on and the cafeteria staff at Southampton High School make sure that everyone had something hot to eat. At the height of the storm, they sheltered and fed more than 140 county residents.

I saw Deputy Sheriffs working 12-hour shifts, braving the wind and the rain, running chainsaws trying to keep roadways passable for emergency vehicles. I saw them put together a strike team to cut their way into the Town of Branchville during the height of the storm when all access was cut off by downed trees.

I saw the Sheriff's communications staff working around the clock, fielding calls from concerned citizens, monitoring power outages, and maintaining radio communications with first responders. I saw them utilize the new emergency notification system numerous times, delivering valuable and timely telephone messages for county residents on storm events.

I saw our Assistant County Administrator spend the weekend in our Emergency Operations Center, staying in regular contact with the State EOC in Richmond, letting them know how we were faring in Southampton County and what resources we needed. I saw our Department of Community Development arrive bright and early on Sunday morning to begin assessing the storm damage, along with our County Extension Agent out scouting the crops, so that state and federal officials might know whether or not we qualified for federal assistance.

I saw the men and women of VDOT clear the majority of debris from almost 800 miles of roadway in Southampton County within 24 hours. Amazing. I know they had help from volunteer fire departments, rescue squads, and many other able-bodied volunteers. They were also assisted by our Department of Public Works, which later collaborated on the overall plan for debris collection and disposal. Three weeks later, they're still collecting and transporting the storm debris Irene left behind. It's thankless work.

I saw our Buildings and Grounds Supervisor cutting up downed trees on public property, putting tarps on damaged roofs of public facilities and pumping water from the Courthouse basement. I saw, and still see, our Accounting staff tracking the associated expenses, and making sure the appropriate paperwork is in place for us to receive every nickel of federal reimbursement for which we're entitled.

For all that I saw, I'm sure there are dozens of things that I didn't – countless acts of personal sacrifice by public employees and volunteers. Like all of you, I'm glad Irene wasn't as bad as expected. But I saw enough to know that, regardless of the severity of the next storm, there's an outstanding group of dedicated public employees and volunteers in Southampton County that will be there for us.