

# Storm surge warnings raised in time for hurricane season

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“Run from water; hide from wind.”

This part of a common seasonal warning often is emphasized by emergency management specialists as they try to prepare the public for coping with unpredictable storm events.

And this year, as Florida’s sea waters are warming up and the 2010 hurricane season approaches, Hillsborough County is backing up the caution with a new component in its storm preparedness and shelter outreach -- a coastal signage program designed to remind that a water

surge is a major danger.

Aimed at indicating just how high coastal waters driven onshore by hurricane force winds could get as a surge rushes to cover the land, the 30 signs are being placed in permanent locations adjacent to the county’s shorelines. More than half of them – 16 – are in the South County area, most near the eastern shore of Tampa Bay between Gibsonton and Ruskin.

The Hillsborough storm surge signage program is unique among the state’s counties with susceptible shorelines, said Eugene Henry, Hazard Mitigation Manager in the county’s Planning and Growth Management Department. Other counties have undertaken various means of warning their citizens, he added, “but none to the extent that Hillsborough has.”

All of the county’s five evacuation zones, including large parts of the bay’s eastern shore communities, are vulnerable to storm surges, according to the hazard mitigation section. Sea water being pushed toward shore, the result of easily combined natural tidal changes and the swirling wind action of a category 3 or 4 or 5 hurricane merely skirting the state’s Gulf Coast, can cause severe flooding onshore.

In fact, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) warns that the greatest potential for loss of life in hurricane circumstances is from the storm surge. In parts of Hillsborough County, local hazard mitigation personnel added, a storm surge could reach three miles inland from the shorelines and could create flood water depths of 13 to 17 feet. Such an onrush of water would completely engulf a one-story home – and everyone in it, they noted.

It is planning to avoid such a situation that the signage program is all about, Henry said. The water blue and surf white signs with red lettering literally point to the possible storm water surge level and pointedly encourage residents of the area to make a family plan to be followed if a surge should become reality. Living on the county’s coastlines offers many pleasures, Henry indicated, but also comes with trade-offs and one of them is planning to survive if faced with a serious storm.



This storm surge sign is meant to warn residents that in a high category hurricane, water could conceivably reach this level. This sign is posted on 19th Avenue in Ruskin just off US 41. Mitch Traphagen photo

The 14 South County signs located south of the Alafia River are spotted at Gibsonton Drive, Big Bend Road, Apollo Beach Boulevard, 19th Avenue, Shell Point Road and College Avenue, plus at the Gardenville, Apollo Beach and Ruskin Recreation Centers as well as at E.G. Simmons Regional Park. Yet another sign is placed in Riverview as a reminder of the possibility the Alafia could overflow its banks under certain conditions.

Two more are located north of the Alafia near the Williams Park boat ramp and at the

western end of Riverview Drive.

The signage program was financed with \$30,000 from a federal grant shared by the Emergency Operations Center, Henry said. Part of the design and engineering work for the project was donated by the firms PBS&J, Inc., and Bracken Engineering, both with Tampa offices.

However, the flood water depth warning concept in Hillsborough originated in Gibsonton about 15 years ago, said Pete Johnson, Gibsonton native and a member of the Local Mitigation Strategy Working Group. The first water warning sign in the county, put up by the Concerned Citizens of Gibsonton, was located at Gibsonton Drive near U.S. 41, Johnson recalled. But over time, it decayed and was removed. Building on the initial concept, the county's Hazard Mitigation section began planning the county-wide signage program in 2004. Today, it hoped that the new signage will impress coastal residents with the importance of preparing for the storm surge that could accompany any of the upcoming season's hurricanes swinging into the Gulf of Mexico, Henry said. "Run from water; hide from wind," he concluded, "because you well may drown if you don't escape the water."

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