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On October 3 Hurricane Todd came ashore in Beaufort County wiping out homes and businesses all across Hilton Head Island, Daufuskie, Bluffton, Beaufort, Sheldon, Fripp and St. Helena. Power was lost and government facilities were destroyed. Roadways became impassable due to severe flooding and the large number of uprooted trees piled up across the asphalt. High winds of 129 miles-per-hour hurled debris into the air like missiles and left it scattered in huge stacks of rubble, completely trashing the beautiful Lowcountry landscape.

Most Beaufort County residents evacuated. Those who stayed behind either perished, suffered injuries or were trapped in damaged buildings without power. Survivors faced disease from unsanitary conditions and a lack of safe drinking water. There was no place to obtain food and only the mosquitoes and snakes appeared to thrive.

Your local government went into action. Government representatives from Beaufort County, Bluffton, Hilton Head Island and Beaufort rapidly implemented the Beaufort County Disaster Recovery Plan. Development of the plan began in 2006 through multiple group work sessions and guidance from consultants who had gained expertise from Katrina and other disasters. In fact, Beaufort County is one of the few counties in the U.S. to have such a plan.

As you may have surmised, Hurricane Todd was not a real storm, but part of an intensive FEMA hurricane recovery exercise presented at the national Emergency Management Training Institute in Emmittsburg, Md. in late March. Although hypothetical; the lessons learned from Hurricane Todd were real and invaluable.

Seventy-three local people attended the training, which was paid for by the federal government. Students included elected officials and key staffers from Beaufort County, the municipalities of Hilton Head Island, Bluffton and Beaufort, public service districts, military installations, fire departments, law enforcement agencies, DHEC, the Red Cross, United Way, chambers of commerce, hospitals, the Palmetto Breeze bus service and others.

Not only was the trip an opportunity to test the much reviewed and ever-expanding County recovery plan; it allowed us to make personal contact with the people we are going to be working with during a real recovery effort and make sure everyone's expectations are realistic and mutually understood. It also clarified important processes and allowed further analysis and review under the tutelage of veteran disaster specialists.

The exercise culminated with a hard look at where Beaufort County might be 45 days into the recovery process following a hurricane. It brought home the extreme difficulty of such specific matters as debris management and temporary housing. Through the process, several scenarios evolved to address these problems.

Another challenge in planning for disaster recovery is the uncertainty of the impacts. You cannot predict what areas will be accessible for temporary housing, clinics, schools, water and food distribution sites, debris management, etc. It all depends upon damage assessment after the event. The training brought to our full attention to the complexity and magnitude this type of operation.

There is much competition among local governments across the nation to be accepted for this federal training. County emergency management officials tried for years to obtain an invitation. We are grateful for this invaluable opportunity and have grown in confidence in our ability to respond and recover should a disaster occur.