

Planning Ahead = Cost-Conscious Storm Preparation

As hurricane season begins, planning ahead is critical for all of us to come through a major storm safely.

Hurricane Michael last year and 2017's Hurricane Irma were both reminders of how vulnerable we could be if a hurricane hits, so now's the time to get ready. Don't wait until August, or until a tropical depression is forming in the Atlantic Ocean. And certainly don't wait until there's nothing left in the stores and winds are starting to pick up.

Not only does planning ahead give you more time to make sure your hurricane checklist is completed, it can save you money. The Federal Emergency Management Agency offers these tips for cost-conscious hurricane preparedness:

- Look for used and discount emergency items: Certain emergency supplies such as radios and flashlights don't necessarily need to be purchased new or at full price. Of course, make sure such supplies are in good working condition.
- Store water: Purchasing commercially bottled water is recommended, but not always economically feasible. Start washing out and saving two-liter soft drink bottles now, so there are plenty on hand to fill with tap water when a storm is approaching.
- Spread out your emergency preparedness shopping: Buying batteries one week, a giant jar of peanut butter the next, and then canned tuna, and so on, is easier on the wallet than purchasing everything at once. Stock up on non-perishable items.
- Check out the dollar and discount stores: They offer items at a low cost, from cleaning products to coloring books for the kids that would come in handy if the power goes off.
- Clean out your gutters and drains: Make sure that water isn't collecting on the roof and around your home in rainstorms, which can mean less damage and fewer costly repairs if a major storm hits.
- Cut limbs from trees near your house. One of the biggest end-products from storms is debris. Having that debris not damage your house will save you money!
- Once hurricane season starts, generator prices may go higher. Purchase a generator off-season.

In addition to checking out information from sources like the FEMA website and The Hurricane Guide, check out the county-specific hurricane guides offered by Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, Citrus, Hernando and Manatee counties. Each includes information such as shelter addresses and updates on evacuation zones. Along with reading the hurricane guides, now's the best time to familiarize yourself with the emergency preparedness section of your city's or county's website. Many include such useful information as:

- A link to sign up for emergency alerts.
- A place where residents with special needs can register so they can have emergency officials help them evacuate should the need arise.
- Sandbag distribution sites.

It's up to all of us to work together and do our homework as hurricane season begins. Let's be ready for the next major storm.