

Hurricane Irene – And Beyond

Hurricane Irene provided a lesson for us all. When serious weather events hit, having batteries, fuel, containers of water and a confident state of mind really make a difference.

Almost a million people lost power in Connecticut, including 80% of Essex households.

Falling trees and branches took down electric wires. Many phone lines and cell phone towers also failed. Streets were blocked. For those with wells, even faucets stopped running.

Emergency Management tirelessly coordinated recovery efforts. Volunteers from the fire and ambulance departments, along with our local **Visiting Nurse Association**, responded to those in greatest need. Police responded reliably to every concern. The **American Red Cross** provided food, water, showers and a place to sleep at **John Winthrop Middle School**. The landfill extended its hours to accommodate clean-ups.

A CL&P representative was stationed at the Town Hall to assess damage and coordinate efforts, while trucks and chainsaws went around removing downed trees. Thanks to their efforts, power was restored faster than expected.

As a Town employee, I was struck by how well most people responded. They understood the scope of the emergency and heroically did their best to cope. Instead of slowing recovery efforts with unreasonable demands or complaints, they were patient, understanding and helpful. We have good people here.

I was also impressed by the volunteers, utility workers and other Town employees who diligently confronted all challenges.

For future reference, it helps to know the following:

- Most outages were caused by falling trees and branches. Utility companies regularly go around cutting branches and trees that pose risk. Before they cut anything, they must get the owner's permission, and this is not always given.
- Recovery crew responsibilities are limited. Town crews clear the roads of fallen trees and debris. When power lines are involved, however, utility companies do the cutting themselves.
- CL&P, a private company, is not allowed to work on poles owned by AT&T, another private company, and vice versa.
- No one is allowed to work on power lines in high wind conditions, which can delay progress.
- Each town is assigned utility crews. If the interrupted feed is outside of town, they must go there to make further repairs possible.
- Assessments must be made before repairs can begin, and that takes time.
- Utility crews stagger their breaks so that most are working at any given moment. Progress goes faster during the day when visibility is good.

- Some people requested a list of which streets would be worked on and when. Unfortunately, such accuracy is not possible early on. No one knows the extent of each problem, how long it will take to be fixed, or how one problem influences another. Crews can be diverted when emergencies arise. An inaccurate list would only add to public frustration. Accurate projections become possible later on.
- The grid supporting community power is complicated. One house may get power before another nearby. That does not mean that some are being ignored. It means that one problem has been solved in a necessary sequence so that others will follow.
- Towns assign priorities to certain areas that provide vital services, such as hospitals, communal water supplies, sewage plants or elderly housing.
- When you see a utility truck on the side of the road, not doing any work, keep in mind that the workers might be resting after 16 hours of work, or waiting for supplies.
- Rumors abound during difficult times. People wonder if unseen crews are working at all. Spreading such rumors helps no one. Workers doing 16 hour shifts deserve praise, not criticism. The steady progress of restoration, ahead of schedule, attests to their efforts.
- Volunteering or helping neighbors is not only a rewarding and empowering experience, it brings out the best in all of us.

By learning from this recent event, we should all be better prepared for future emergencies.

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