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Irene gets wary eye
By Jennifer Swartz
Friday, August 26, 2011

A massive Hurricane Irene whose predicted path toggled back to the west has residents giving it a wary eye as evacuations were ordered and a state of emergency held sway.

As of 5 a.m. Irene was a Category 2 storm forecast to make landfall along Carteret County as a Category 3 on Saturday afternoon. Hurricane warnings are in effect for entire area, meaning winds of at least 74 mph could reach the Greenville area. A flood watch also is in effect for entire area through Sunday.

Mandatory evacuations have been ordered for areas in Carteret and Beaufort counties, and officials in Pitt County are expected to decide today when and where they will open emergency shelters. Click here for the latest National Weather Service briefing and graphics.

Weekend events throughout the area were shuttered. East Carolina University officials canceled all classes after 3 this afternoon and urged students to leave town if they had a safer place.

"If you've got a good place to go, this weekend's a good time to go," said Tom Pohlman, ECU Environmental Health and Safety manager.

The university hoped the extra time would allow parents time to fetch their children and give students ample opportunity to leave. Students in residence halls who choose to stay on campus will be safe, Pohlman said.

Students who live in off-campus housing posed a greater challenge, inspiring officials to suggest they leave Greenville if possible, Pohlman said.
Across the east, cities, counties, schools and utilities ramped up response to the strongest hurricane to envelope the East Coast in seven years.

Early Thursday, Gov. Bev Perdue declared a state of emergency for all of North Carolina. By late afternoon, the coast was under a hurricane warning.

At 5 p.m., Irene was 575 south of Cape Hatteras and pummeling Abaco Island as it moved northwest at 14 mph. The Category 3 storm packed winds of 115 mph, meeting the threshold for a major hurricane.

It is expected to slam into the North Carolina coast before marching up the eastern seaboard, affecting every city in its path along Interstate 95, including Washington, New York and Boston. When it is all over damage could be in the billions of dollars, officials said.

The mammoth storm, with tropical-storm-force winds boasting nearly twice the normal reach, pulled a fast one early Thursday, altering its course to the west just enough to paint a bullseye on coastal eastern North Carolina.

By noon Thursday Carteret County was in a state of emergency. Officials opened shelters and called for mandatory evacuations for visitors and residents of Bogue Banks and voluntary withdrawal from the county for the infirm and people in low-lying areas and mobile homes.

"It's not looking good," said Jo Ann Smith, Carteret County emergency services director. Jim Chrisman, Beaufort County's interim manager, said a mandatory evacuation there requires residents of low-lying areas to leave by early-afternoon Saturday. "The critical areas that could see the most impact include Belhaven and Aurora," he said, where the storm surge from the Pamlico River could be at its highest.

Predictions Thursday called for tropical-storm-force winds in excess of 60 mph and anywhere from 4-8 inches of rain with conditions beginning to deteriorate Friday night. A flood watch was in effect for Pitt and surrounding counties through Sunday.

The storm prompted Winterville Watermelon Festival officials to postpone all Saturday events. It has rescheduled a country music concert featuring Rodney Atkins for Sept. 11. Pitt Community College also canceled classes after 5 p.m. Friday. PCC and ECU schools were set to resume coursework on Monday.

Pitt County officials prepared Thursday to open shelters and begin manning an emergency operations center.

At Red Cross headquarters in Greenville, volunteers such as veteran shelter-worker Annie Chapman turned out to lend a hand. Chapman, 55, helped run a shelter north of the Tar River at Wellcome Middle School in 1999 after Hurricane Floyd.
Chapman recalled bursting into the shelter kitchen looking for work to distract herself as emergency crews searched for her missing 11-year-old son.

"I went in that kitchen and said 'I raised boys; I know what to do,'" she said Thursday during a shelter-training course.

Taught by disaster nurse Donna Dorsey, the impromptu four-hour sessions aimed to give volunteers the information and confidence needed to staff shelters. "We'll train them and they'll feel a lot more comfortable," she said. "This is the way they can help."

At the city, department heads, police, fire-rescue and other emergency officials spent Thursday establishing an emergency operations center. Recreation centers would be shuttered all weekend but normal city services would continue for now, officials said. Roadwork was suspended during the storm statewide as N.C. Department of Transportation crews poured over pre-storm checklists, double-checked equipment and gassed up vehicles, said Hollie Allen, a spokeswoman for DOT.

In the city, public works crews labored Thursday to clear roads and drains and zero in on flood-prone areas. Residents were urged to check catch basins, clear debris and call 329-4522 if grates and drains were filled with debris.

"We'd like to do as much before the event as possible to keep everyone safe," said Steve Hawley, the city's public information officer.

The Associated Press contributed to this report; Contact Jennifer Swartz at jswartz@reflector.com or 252-329-9565.
Editorial: Time to prepare for worst case
Friday, August 26, 2011

Eastern North Carolina approaches the possibility of a hurricane strike with a swagger surpassed only by residents of southern Florida. The region has repeatedly seen the worst that tropical weather can muster and survived it, more or less intact, so that even a Category 3 hurricane churning off the coast elicits bravado and defiance rather than fear.

Yet, with storm models showing the strong likelihood of Hurricane Irene making landfall near Morehead City, the time for ignoring this threat is at an end. Pitt County may be lashed with hurricane-force winds and several inches of rain in the coming 48 hours, and residents should ready themselves for the conditions that may result during and after the storm.

As Irene's track became clearer on Thursday, many businesses and government institutions, such as East Carolina University, began preparing for the possibility of a severe strike. While Pitt County is not likely to face the full brunt of the storm, it could see winds reaching 100 mph and perhaps nine inches of rain on Saturday. Thankfully, the region is quite dry so it is unlikely to deal with a flood event on par with Hurricane Floyd in 1999, but localized and flash flooding is a strong possibility.

The most important thing for residents to do in advance of the storm is to prepare an emergency kit in case the worst should unfold this weekend. Water is, of course, the most crucial commodity, but non-perishable food items, First Aid supplies, candles and batteries for radios and flashlights are necessities as well. Check prescription medication to ensure an ample supply and ready a travel bag should the need arise to take refuge elsewhere.

That may seem excessive for storm veterans, who take a certain pride in mocking those headed to the store for water, milk, bread and toilet paper today. However, the value for respecting this storm — which could be severe — is that it could aid emergency responders in their task. Those who are self-sufficient do not require assistance and allow police and fire-rescue to focus their energy on residents in greater need.

Yes, Hurricane Irene may pass to the east, raking the Outer Banks and leaving Pitt County generally unscathed. However, given the tracking models, now is not the time for bravado. This is a day to ready the community for the worst scenario and to help family, friends and neighbors do the same.
NCCU credit rating is cut

BY JANE STANCILL | Staff Writer

DURHAM—N.C. Central University's credit rating has been downgraded.

Moody's Investors Service, a major credit rating agency, has moved NCCU's bond rating down one notch from A2 to A3. Despite the downgrade, the agency classifies the university's outlook as "stable."

In a report Wednesday, Moody's said the downgrade "reflects the University's thinning financial resources and low monthly liquidity, recently pressured operations with deep reductions in appropriations and very little headroom" on $19.9 million in foundation debt related to the Eagle Landing housing project.

NCCU is the first UNC campus to have its credit downgraded during the financial squeeze and state budget cuts. Recently, Western Carolina University's outlook was shifted from "stable" to "negative," but that move stopped short of a downgrade.

Charles Perusse, vice president for finance at the UNC system, said the NCCU downgrade occurred in the course of a periodic review by Moody's. He explained that last year, Moody's recalibrated, putting all borrowing entities on an equalized scale of rating. As a result, each UNC campus moved up one step in the ratings at that time.

So essentially, Perusse said, the downgrade puts NCCU back to where it was a year ago.

"From an operational standpoint, this has no impact on any existing debt that Central has," Perusse said.

In the report, Moody's said NCCU has $88 million in outstanding debt. Among the university's challenges, the agency says, is that NCCU tapped its reserves in the past five years to upgrade housing and dining facilities. Moody's also cited "steep cuts in state appropriations," including a reduction of 15 percent in the current year. At the same time, enrollment has flattened as NCCU seeks to strengthen the academic profile of its students.

May hurt borrowing

The change in the rating has no effect on NCCU's current budget, but it could make borrowing more expensive in the future. The Moody's report
mentioned that NCCU is in the initial planning stages on two capital projects - a $40 million residence hall that may begin construction in 2012 and a roughly $50 million student union that has no projected start date.

But the report noted that NCCU has cut expenses and managed a near break-even operating budget in 2010 after several years of operating deficits.

"The impact is essentially this: going forward, although the cost of capital may increase, the good news with the downgrade is that we have a stable outlook," Wendell M. Davis, NCCU's vice chancellor for finance and administration, said in a statement. "This is a vote of confidence in NCCU's future. Despite the deep cuts from the state, the rating agency believes we are in a good position for recovery."

Perusse said the downgrade was unexpected. UNC finance staff will closely analyze the report to determine whether other campuses could face a similar outcome. "It's definitely something we're paying strong attention to," he said.

Credit ratings have been closely watched as the economy has faltered. This month, Standard & Poor's downgraded the United States' rating for the first time in history.

"We're in a different economic situation right now, and all the financial statements and reviews are becoming more strict and more comprehensive," Perusse said.

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UNCC to start Alcoholics Anonymous program

By Tony Burbeck

UNC Charlotte plans to establish an Alcoholics Anonymous program this fall for students.

The hope is it will be the start of a comprehensive effort to battle student alcoholism, called the Collegiate Recovery Program.

UNCC junior Dustin Clark made a video as a class project and put it on YouTube, showing how easy it is for underage students to get a case of beer into a dorm and drink.

"I have gotten cases of beer, put them in a backpack and walked up inside dorms multiple times," Clark said.

College students drinking isn't anything new. Some consider it a rite of passage from high school to college.

Clark said he's had had a few beers, but some friends routinely have too much.

"I definitely know those people, I've seen them before," he said.

So has Loren Scott-Brown. She says a close friend and classmate at UNCC majored in drinking more than academics.

"She would drink and not remember anything. It wasn't really fun to deal with that," Scott-Brown said. "It did affect her school work."

Students with similar stories are who UNCC wants trying to help. This fall, UNCC plans to start its own Alcoholics Anonymous group then, over time, grow it to a broader Collegiate Recovery Program. That could include providing students a safe place to meet with other students who are committed to their sobriety, 12 step meetings twice a week, relapse prevention seminars and possibly scholarships to those in the program who stay sober at least six months.

It's something Clark wants to see on campus.

"Get the understanding and knowledge that school should still come first for them," he said.
Scott-Brown says she would have recommended that help to her friend. "Some people get sidetracked by alcohol and they need somewhere to go,” she said. "They wouldn't think they were all alone in it."

UNCC school officials say in addition to bringing Alcoholics Anonymous to campus, they plan to survey students this fall about what would be most helpful for people in alcohol recovery.

UNCC says getting a collegiate recovery program going is not a quick process and will take time. The school also has to find funding to pay for it.
Study: Hispanics now outnumber blacks in college

By Daniel de Vise

For the first time, young Hispanics outnumber blacks on college campuses. A study released today by the Pew Hispanic Center finds that enrollment of Hispanic students aged 18 to 24 rose by 24 percent in a single year, reaching 1.8 million in October 2010.

That’s 349,000 new Hispanic students. By contrast, black enrollment rose by 88,000 and Asian American enrollment rose by 43,000. White enrollment declined by 320,000. These crisscrossing numbers amplify the shift in the overall makeup of the college population.

There are now 1.8 million Hispanics enrolled in American colleges, 1.7 million blacks and 800,000 Asians. White enrollment has declined from about 8 million in 2009 to 7.7 million last fall.

Growth in Hispanic enrollment is fed by a rapid increase in the nation’s Hispanic population, which rose by 7 percent between 2009 and 2010. But a bigger portion is rising attainment — meaning that a growing share of Hispanics are enrolling in college. Hispanic attainment rose from 27 percent in 2009 to 32 percent in 2010, a five-point gain in a single year.

To put that number in context, Hispanics still trail all other racial and ethnic groups in enrollment rate. Young Asians are most likely to go to college, with an enrollment rate of 62 percent; whites are far behind at 43 percent; 38 percent of blacks and 32 percent of Hispanics enroll.

The white college population is declining because of a falling birth rate; the young white population has been falling since 2008.

Hispanics are nearly as likely to enroll in community colleges as four-year colleges, whereas whites and Asians favor four-year colleges at a ratio of about 3 to 1.

This post has been updated since it was first published.