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Hurricane Irma's aftermath dominates meeting; Commission chairman creates last-minute policy



Chairman John Meeks

Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 20, 2017 at 6:47 p.m.

BRONSON -- Although it was a relatively mild natural disaster that swept through Levy County, some people went without power for a week in Levy County after Hurricane Irma hit.

With no doubt, every municipal and county council, commission, board and association is conducting post-hurricane reviews in the Tri-County Area.

In Levy County, one department manager asked for some leeway in regard to a last-minute policy created by Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks.

<https://youtu.be/yhwTXeP3in4>

In this video, Chairman John Meeks answers a question about providing a method for workers to make up for lost time and wages as a result of Hurricane Irma shutting down county offices for a few days.

This last-minute policy created in the emergency status just before the storm hit provides that county workers who cannot work due to the courthouse being closed, or other offices being closed, do not get paid.

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County Commissioner Matt Brooks (left) and County Commissioner Lilly Rooks (right) look at Chairman John Meeks as he speaks.



County Commissioner Mike Joyner likes Chairman John Meeks' plan to not pay county workers who cannot work due to natural disasters. Joyner said he thinks government should be run like a business.

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County Commissioner Rock Meeks said people must take personal responsibility. If they don't evacuate and die because there was no cot at a shelter, or they couldn't take their cat to a shelter, then that is a choice they made.



County Commissioner Lilly Rooks spent time at Levy County Animal Services during the hurricane, helping to tend to pets that were sheltered there while their owners were in evacuation shelters.

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County Coordinator Wilbur Dean said he concurs with the policy created by Chairman John Meeks.

Chairman Meeks decided to create county policy with no meeting of the County Commission. He said with the emergency status of the impending storm

before a regular meeting would be held that he chose to create a policy where the county did not pay employees for days when the county offices were closed.

Levy County Extension Director Ed Jennings asked to allow some of his workers to use annual leave time, sick days or compensatory time to trade that time out for normal work hours -- so that they don't lose a few days' pay.

Meeks stood strong Tuesday morning (Sept. 19) by his decision to create the policy the Wednesday (Sept. 6) before the county ordered a mandatory evacuation on Friday (Sept. 8).

Extension Director Jennings told Chairman Meeks and the other four commissioners that he feels like he gave his workers bad advice, because messages about Meeks' new policy were not clear to Jennings in regard to how that would impact some of the "non-essential" workers.

There was a very long discussion about the issue.

Linda Cooper, one of the half-dozen regular Levy County resident attendees of County Commission meetings, asked about employees being paid for the days when the courthouse was closed.

Chairman Meeks told Cooper that Monday (Sept. 11) was given to employees as an administrative day with pay.

With offices also closed Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday (Sept. 12, 13 and 14), Meeks said employees could use vacation days, a floating holiday if they had not used it, sick days or compensatory time if they had it so that they would not see a smaller than usual paycheck.

Meeks said some county employees worked, despite offices being closed. He mentioned one worker shoveled dog kennels and walked dogs at Levy Animal Services and another county worker manned a phone line at the Emergency Operations Center in Bronson.

"I did not know that," Extension Director Jennings said.

He was unable to correctly inform his department workers of this. He saw an email that said county government was closed.

Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean said essential personnel who were called out

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during the closure of county government were paid at a rate of time and one-half.

Anthony Drew, Alvin Wilkerson and Jennings worked on agricultural matters during that time, Jennings said.

With no telephone working, Levy County Extension administrative assistants were told to stay home, he said. The new 4-H assistant who has zero comp time, or sick leave or vacation time accrued would have to take a three-day loss of pay, Jennings explained.

“I’m sorry there was some confusion on this,” Chairman Meeks said, “but there was a written policy (created two days before the county offices closed).”

Chairman Meeks said that Hurricane Hermine a year ago caused people to be paid when they did not work, and some employees who were essential complained that they did not feel it was fair to have to work when others didn’t.

Chairman Meeks went on to say he wanted to “incentivize” so that people would want to work during a natural disaster rather than think they would be paid for staying at home or in a shelter where it was safe.

Meeks said his creation of the policy as an emergency declaration did not require the whole County Commission to approve. He said it is in writing, and if someone wants to modify it in the future that can happen too.

“If you didn’t have any time on the books,” Chairman Meeks said, “I am sorry for your luck.”

Jennings said he is not contesting the policy Meeks created. He is just seeking a method to help his employees who he felt were not informed completely about Chairman Meeks’ policy.

Jennings, Drew and Wilkerson worked to help farmers and ranchers, he said.

“The non-essential office personnel,” Jennings said, “I told them to stay home.”

Since they followed his instructions, they are not going to be paid for that time, he said.

“I just think this is really wrong,” Jennings said. “I think y’all need to rethink this. I’m telling you – you give a prayer about supporting people at the beginning of this meeting... How does this come across to the employees?”

“If you want to squash morale,” Jennings added, “you’re doing a good job of it. It’s my opinion. It means no more than anybody else’s. I’m just saying I feel pretty bad. I feel pretty bad in not calling those people in. I thought I was following a directive that came from someone up the food chain from me.”

Jennings expressed his opinion that the last-minute policy creation and then not making it clear is not an ethical practice in regard to how employees were treated in this regard.

County Coordinator Dean said the storm event left him with no prior knowledge on the duration of how long county government would have to be closed. Dean said he needed to look at the matter from a financial perspective.

Although all of the normal salaries were in the previously approved budget for this fiscal year, Dean asked “At what point do you draw the line there?”

Dean said most people who have their jobs shut down, just do not get paid.

He said Chairman Meeks created a “happy medium” by allowing workers to use vacation, sick or comp time. Dean said there is a balance between helping employees and in not spending tax dollars that can be saved by not paying people who were unable to work due to the county government being shut down for a few days.

The extension director had created a schedule for non-essential workers to go to the

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Emergency Operations Center to answer phones during those days when the office was closed.

“I had a schedule set,” Jennings said, “for them to man the EOC. We were never asked again.”

The people in his department wanted to help the county, Jennings said, but they were told not to come.

Jennings asked if his employees who lost three days of pay could make it up by coming in and working extra hours.

Chairman Meeks said they could, but then he questioned how that would be possible because the pay period for that time is now gone.

Chairman Meeks said that after the workers who served on Friday during the Hurricane Hermine event in 2016 complained to him that they worked and other people were rewarded and did not work, he wanted to have a written policy.

He went on to defend the policy he created.

Jennings said the phones were not working. The agricultural workers were able to do work, but there was no need to have people answering phones.

Chairman Meeks said they were not essential to the office at that point.

“So they just get a leave without pay day,” Jennings said.

Chairman Meeks said County Administrator Dean will find work for a person if they have no leave time, or sick time or comp time to use.

And so the problem was solved.

Sally Ann Collins mentioned that when she worked at Miami-Dade Community College and Hurricane Andrew struck the Bahamas and Florida in mid-August 1992, her employer automatically gave everyone two weeks off with pay.

The National Guard was called in because the devastation in the area was widespread and significant in 1992.

A majority of the members of the County Commission said they endorse Meeks’ policy in regard to not paying employees in the event of a natural disaster if they cannot work.

OTHER ACTION



Levy County 4-H Agent Genevieve Mendoza is joined by Levy County Extension Director Ed Jennings. The County Commission thanked Agent Mendoza for her excellent work in continuing Levy County 4-H after the retirement of former 4-H Agent Albert Fuller.

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In other action, the County Commission unanimously:

* Declared Oct. 1-7 as National 4-H Week in Levy County. Levy County 4-H Agent Genevieve Mendoza answered a question in regard to the bees at the Levy County Agriculture Center. The bees survived Hurricane Irma, she said. Levy County Extension Director Ed Jennings expressed his appreciation for the inmates who came and cleaned up the pavilion area, to accommodate the countywide FFA program that used the facility on Wednesday (Sept. 20).

* Ratified emergency declarations after the fact due to Hurricane Irma.

* Approved the annual contract with the Florida Department of Health in regard to the Levy County Unit, which is one of three county units under the direction Administrator of Health Barbara Locke, R.N., M.P.H.

* Approved the use of \$45,000 of Court Innovation Money to fund a new Court Management Software system. Finance Director Jared Blanton explained Levy County was the only one of the six counties in the Eighth Judicial Circuit using a different software system. By becoming uniform, this helps the clerk's office.

* Approved the acceptance of money from the state to aid the Levy County Public Library System.

* Approved an agreement with the Town of Inglis in regard to moving an ambulance from a satellite location next to U.S. Highway 19 north of Inglis behind a former FHP station. When the mission is complete, the ambulance and crew will be housed at the Inglis Fire Department, which is next to Town Hall. This puts the ambulance closer to where the majority of calls are made for service from that paramedic and EMT.