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Houston County prepping for Ike

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CROCKETT-Officials in Houston County are preparing for the worst and hoping for the best as Hurricane Ike moves closer to the Upper Texas Coast.

Houston County Judge Lonnie Hunt said beginning Wednesday afternoon officials could see the storm coming toward them.

“Every time we checked yesterday (Wednesday) we saw the storm taking more of a northerly turn,” Hunt said. “Now, as of early this morning (Thursday) the National Weather Service told us to expect tropical storm force winds with a chance for hurricane force winds.”

On Thursday afternoon, the national weather service put coastal counties, including Houston County, into a “Hurricane Wind Watch.”

NWS reported it expects the storm to move up the I-45 corridor.

“Right now it (Ike) looks like it will be moving just to the west of us, which means we could get the worst side of it,” Hunt lamented.

As of Thursday morning, things were still normal in Houston County, but Hunt said once I-45’s southbound lanes were opened up to contra-flow traffic to allow for the evacuation, traffic in Houston County would definitely pick up.

“Folks who know the area will get off I-45 and head this way,” Hunt noted. “Plus if the folks around Beaumont start evacuating, (U.S.) 287 comes right through here and that is a major way out of the Beaumont area.”

As of noon Thursday, residents in Orange and Jefferson counties were ordered to evacuate. As far as evacuees staying in the county, Hunt said he doesn’t expect to see many.

“People always ask us if we have shelters open,” the judge said. “We are directed by the state to keep people moving north in these situations.”

“We have places that would open if asked, but if the weather gets bad here we will need many of those shelters for our local people.”

Shelters across Houston County also act as “last resort” destinations, Hunt explained.

“Our shelters would be some of the last to open to catch some of the last evacuees coming from that area,” the judge added.

While the county is asking area residents to stock up on water, batteries and other food to get them through the storm, Houston County Electric Cooperative is working to ensure they have the assets in place to deal with any eventuality.

“We have contract crews on standby and others from out of town ready to give extra help if it’s needed,” said HCEC spokesperson Brooke Evans. “Right now we are getting our game plan together, but we won’t know what we will be facing until it happens.”

Now, the electric coop is working on contacting customers on life support equipment warning them of the impending storm.

“We are making sure the people on our critical care list have backup equipment (in the event of power outages) or that they have made other arrangements to get out of the area,” Evans said.

For those who do lose power, Evans asked customers to call the HCEC power outage hotline at (800) 970-4232, which will log the location of the outage and help repair crews pinpoint outages.

Also, Evans advised people with downed lines to stay away from them and to let repair crews remove limbs and other items from lines.

As for the Hurricane Wind Advisory issued by the National Weather Service, the advisory urges residents of the coastal counties, including Houston County, to “prepare their properties for the potential of damaging winds. Secure or remove any loose items surrounding your property which could be blown around by tropical storm or hurricane force winds. Trim trees near your property. Damaging winds are expected.”

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