



## Should We Evacuate?

*By Steve Hanf* Posted November 24, 2019 In [Coastal Life](#), [Family Matters](#), [OBX Community](#), [Something to Talk About](#)

Should we evacuate? The Dare County Emergency Operations Center help you answer that question. It looks like something straight out of Hollywood. Conference tables lined with phones fill a high-ceilinged room with massive flat-screen monitors on one wall. Generators stand at the ready to provide power and maintain networks should an outage occur. Spartan but comfortable sleeping quarters and a kitchen serve the needs of public servants who are on the clock 24/7 no matter the weather.

The sparkling structure in Manteo across from the aquarium has just one flaw: It didn't come with a magic wand. There's nothing Drew Pearson can wave to convince the residents of Dare County that danger is coming. And that they should heed mandatory evacuation orders.



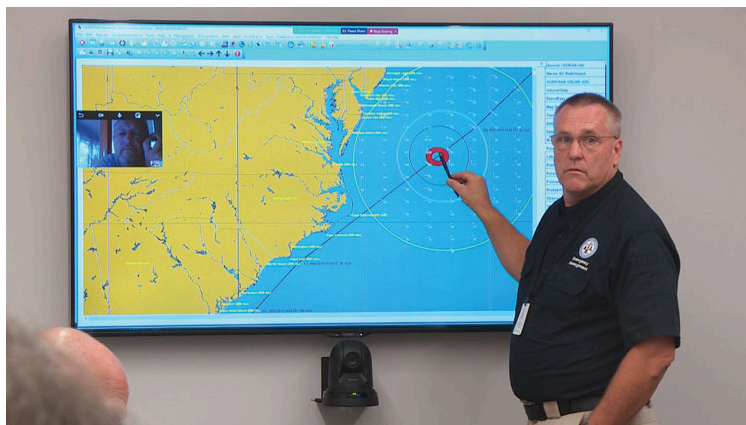
### About the Dare County Control Group

"You may be hearing I've got a passion for getting people to leave," the Emergency Management director says with a laugh. "It's not because I want them to leave. We just think they're gonna be in a much better, safer place than here."

A smaller conference room in the operations center is filled with comfortable chairs for those in uncomfortable positions as storms churn hundreds of miles away. The Dare County Control Group consists of the mayors of Duck, Southern Shores, Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills, Nags Head and Manteo. In addition, the sheriff, and the superintendent of the National Parks of Eastern North Carolina. Also Bob Woodard, the chairman of the Board of Commissioners who also serves as chairman of the Control Group.

Pearson merely advises this group. He works with the county manager and other officials to provide information that helps the members make informed decisions about evacuation orders.

"We're getting them the best information on the potential impacts that we might see from a particular storm," Pearson explains. "We have the audio-visual capabilities here to bring people in from afar. So when the Control Group meets, we bring the National Weather Service in via video teleconferencing and they provide one-on-one dialogue about what the forecast is saying, their confidence in it, and what the impacts are going to be."



Pearson describes the conversations in the room as detailed and with plenty of "back and forth, but always leaning towards the safety of the public and the visitors."

From Gloria in 1985 to Dorian this September, more than 20 hurricanes have left an impact on all or part of the Outer Banks. Emergency Management records show 13 of those storms led to mandatory evacuation orders in the past 34 years. All Dare County residents were asked to leave for Emily in 1993, Bertha in 1996, Bonnie in 1998. As well as, Dennis and Floyd in 1999, Isabel in 2003, Irene in 2011, Florence in 2018, and Dorian. Evacuation orders were issued for Hatteras Island residents and/or visitors with Ophelia in 2005, Earl in 2010, Arthur in 2014 and Maria in 2017.

What happens with each evacuation order issued? Some people scurry. And some people scoff.

"People say, 'Oh, it's mandatory, how do you make them go?' It's really hard to," Pearson admits. "A lot of resilient folks live out here, people who

have been here forever, and they may never go. All we can say to them is, 'If you don't go and it's the storm you've never seen before, we may not be able to help you.' "

Katie Dunavant is a Licensed Professional Counselor who owns and operates Wellness Within Professional Counseling in Kill Devil Hills. When it comes to the psychology involved with people's reactions to evacuation orders, there are many factors at play.

### So, should I evacuate? Or a different view is taken when asking, "Should WE evacuate or not?"

When thinking about the question, "Should WE evacuate?" those who stay might be forced to because they lack a support system to get out of town: reliable transportation, places to stay, lack of funds to pay for hotel rooms, food and gas, or fears of missed paychecks if their employer remains open. There also may be issues of mobility, like those that may be bed-ridden. Others worry about leaving animals behind. And still others worry about getting back on the island after the storm.

Some will stay because important role models in their life always made the decision to ride it out, Dunavant adds. The comparison trap also makes people stay: "We remember that we weathered a previous storm and that provides this level of security," she says.

Others choose to ignore a mandatory evacuation order almost as an act of defiance. They claim for example, that they can take care of themselves, thank you very much.

"Any time we have a natural disaster or a threat of a natural disaster there is this great loss of control that we experience," Dunavant says. "A lot of people, if they leave, they're relinquishing some of that control. But if we stay, it's a perceived way of gaining back some of that control."

Granted, a hurricane is going to do what it wants. Therefore this "is certainly a false sense of control," she adds.



Psychological forces are even at work when people trade barbs on social media or talk trash in their neighborhoods. We've all heard variations of it before. Those who are leaving are wusses who can't ride out a storm – have fun sitting in all that traffic. People who are staying are foolhardy, needlessly putting themselves and first responders in danger – have fun sitting on your roof waiting for help to come.

"When people ridicule others for leaving, or maybe the opposite, often times when we make a decision we can experience this sense of insecurity because we don't ever know if it's the right decision or not," Dunavant explains. "Ridiculing others can provide validation for the decision we've made, and that's why that is done. Either that, or lacking understanding or empathy. They have some tunnel vision going on and can only see themselves in this situation."

Dunavant hails from Camden County and settled on the Outer Banks in 2013, so she's no stranger to storm warnings. When the mandatory evacuation order for Dorian came, she left but had several clients tell her they couldn't.

With Dorian, the Control Group got word from the National Weather Service on Monday. Tropical storm force winds and 4 to 7 feet of storm surge were headed for the Outer Banks starting Wednesday night. A mandatory evacuation for all visitors was set for Tuesday, with residents told to leave Wednesday morning. Starting Wednesday night, Dare County's access was cut off.

"When we were making that decision, it was still sitting over the Bahamas, just wreaking havoc, killing people," Pearson says. "The forecast track didn't change. Dorian was coming. It was just a matter of when he was going to get here and what he was going to bring. It was going to bring the potential of devastation, of life-threatening impacts. So It's better to be someplace safe."

Phone calls and text messages through the emergency alert system provided regular updates about expected impacts and timelines with Dorian. Buses offered to transport residents to inland shelters. And yet, only six people were taken to the Nash County shelter.

Was that disheartening for Pearson? Not exactly.

Yes, he wants people to heed mandatory evacuation orders. But he also wants residents to have a plan in place that doesn't necessarily include a shelter, which is more of a last resort.

"I'm just glad we were able to get whoever needed a ride someplace safe," he says. "I would encourage anybody to follow the mandatory evacuation order, but before they do that to have a plan. For example, 'I've got family in Ohio, I've got family here, I know I can get a hotel room...' Having that plan ready to execute, at least you're in charge of where you're going to end up."

Dorothy Hester, the Public Information Officer for Dare County, just finished a FEMA Master PIO course at the Emergency Management Institute. She's seen amazing changes in how people can be reached in times of crisis in her 20 years with the county. From a bank of 10 fax machines dialing hundreds of numbers to having 42,000 people subscribed to the emergency alert system via text message or the Dare County website ([darenc.com/alerts](http://darenc.com/alerts)).


Despite the ability to reach thousands in an instant, Hester and Pearson understand that some people still won't leave. There's no way to track who goes and who stays, or who adheres to the curfews imposed if they do stay. Those curfews are a good way to keep curious folks off the roads and out of harms way. Making sure to avoid blowing debris, downed power lines, and other hazards during a storm and its aftermath.

"I think all Public Information Officers struggle with that, and certainly those who are in hurricane-prone areas," Hester says. "So many people who've lived here for a very long time base their decisions on past experiences. When I take media calls when storms are approaching, journalists like to ask, 'What storm would you compare this to?' Every storm is so incredibly different. People probably saw that from folks on Ocracoke with Dorian who were saying, 'We've never seen that kind of flooding.' Those are the messages that are so hard to convey to people."

Ultimately, that's the biggest challenge when it comes to issuing mandatory evacuation orders and having people follow them. OBX residents see the devastation Dorian causes in the Bahamas, but shrug as it tracks up the East Coast toward Hatteras because it's "only" a Cat 1 or Cat 2. They evacuate for a monster like Florence, then complain about leaving when it changes course – and destroys huge swaths of the state just a few hundred miles away. They see storm surge wreak havoc in downtown Manteo, Colington, low-lying areas of Highway 12 – yet know this approaching storm won't be like those times.

"The hardest thing for us to do is to get people to not think about the last storm, but to think about what 4 to 7 feet of water in their yard means," Pearson says. "Florence was 9 to 13 feet of storm surge. Florence could have been it. Dorian could have brought a lot more devastation. But a Cat 4 that comes out of the ocean and brings that storm surge. I just don't want anybody to say that we didn't tell them.

"That's the hardest thing for us, is to get people to not think, 'Oh, this is just gonna be like Matthew' or 'this is gonna be like Isabel'. Or like the one that my grandmother told me about 30 years ago," Pearson continues. "You haven't seen the one that's going to kill you yet. If you had, you wouldn't be here." ♦

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Steve Hanf is a former professional sportswriter who teaches the journalism classes at First Flight High School. The dormant Nike Running Club app on his phone offers a reminder of the seven half-marathons and one full marathon he completed ... several years ago.

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