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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED
7431 114TH AVENUE, SUITE 102
LARGO, FL 33773

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HURRICANE PREPAREDNESS:

West Palm Beach's Full-Scale Hurricane Zeke Drill Sets a New Standard

BY KATHLEEN JOY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, CITY OF WEST PALM BEACH

When the Atlantic hurricane season arrives each June, public works professionals across Florida prepare for the immense responsibility that follows any major storm: restoring access, clearing debris, safeguarding public infrastructure, and returning communities to normal life as quickly and safely as possible. In West Palm Beach, that preparation is not theoretical. It is lived, practiced, measured, and refined each year through one of the most comprehensive municipal hurricane-response exercises in the state.

In May 2025, the City of West Palm Beach conducted its annual full-scale hurricane drill, simulating the aftermath of the mythical Hurricane Zeke. Now in its fifth year, the exercise has become a cornerstone of the City's emergency readiness strategy and a model that other municipalities are beginning to emulate. Representatives from Coral Gables, Boynton Beach, and Riviera



Debris pile.

Beach attended the 2025 drill to observe best practices firsthand and bring new insights back to their own communities.

In the weeks leading up to the drill, the City also launched its annual

Vegetation Amnesty Days, held from April 28 to May 9, 2025. During this period, residents could place unlimited vegetative waste, everything from grass clippings and leaves to fallen tree limbs and cut branches, curbside at no extra cost. This citywide cleanup effort plays a critical role in storm preparedness: removing excess yard debris keeps storm drains clear, reduces the risk of flooding, and limits the amount of hazardous material that can become airborne or obstruct roadways during a hurricane. The material collected during Amnesty Days was later used to create the simulated debris field for the drill, adding an additional layer of realism to the exercise.

The drill remains the only exercise of this magnitude in Palm Beach County, and it continues to position West Palm Beach as a statewide leader in hurricane preparedness and interdepartmental coordination.



Crews arriving for debris removal.

LEADING THE WAY IN
**HURRICANE
PREPAREDNESS**



PW Director Leon Pinder, Asst. Chief Brent Bloomfield, Lt. John Hunt.

**A MULTI-DEPARTMENTAL
APPROACH DESIGNED FOR
REAL-WORLD COMPLEXITY**

From its inception, West Palm Beach's hurricane drill has been intentionally designed as a multi-departmental collaborative exercise, recognizing that no single team can handle the aftermath of a major storm alone.

The drill brings these disciplines together long before an emergency strikes, allowing teams to rehearse not just their individual roles but also the intricate choreography required when their responsibilities overlap. Crews learn how to pass information quickly, coordinate equipment and staffing needs, and adapt to unexpected challenges – whether that means rerouting around a downed power line, protecting a damaged water main, or assisting residents in distress. By working as one cohesive unit, City teams build the muscle memory needed for a fully integrated emergency response, exactly what a severe storm event demands. The exercise reinforces how each department's work supports the others, strengthening operational efficiency and significantly reducing response time during a real emergency.

**A REALISTIC, HIGH-INTENSITY
TRAINING GROUND**

The 2025 drill unfolded along a one-block stretch of Ponce De Leon Avenue, where the City strategically deposited yard waste collected during its annual Vegetation Amnesty Days. The result was a realistic post-storm streetscape, complete with fallen trees, scattered debris, abandoned vehicles, simulated power lines, and a designated "hazardous waste" zone.

Teams from Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Fire, Police and Public Utilities mobilized in unison, mirroring the fast-paced coordination and split-second decision-making demanded in an actual post-storm response. Working side by side, they cleared roughly 50 tons of simulated storm debris, assessed structural hazards, stabilized dangerous areas, and responded to staged resident interactions designed to test communication and decision-making under pressure.

Assistant Fire Chief Brent Bloomfield, who leads the City's Emergency Operations Office, noted, "The hardest part is once the storm clears when we go out and see what the damage actually is. Our first mission is to help the citizens. Life safety is always number one, and property conservation comes after that."

This focus on realism is essential. Wind speeds and rainfall totals can be predicted, but the human, environmental, and infrastructure challenges that emerge afterward never follow a script. A successful response relies on preparation, interagency trust, and the ability to collaborate quickly across disciplines, skills this drill strengthens each year.



Assessing the debris field before work begins.

LEADING THE WAY IN
**HURRICANE
 PREPAREDNESS**



“Each annual drill adds a new layer of learning – and a stronger response for the next storm.”

Crews remove debris to uncover car.

The strength of this model has not gone unnoticed. The drill has become a case study in municipal coordination, drawing attention from emergency management professionals and municipal leaders statewide. Observers from the Governor’s Hurricane Conference once again evaluated the City’s performance this year, offering impartial feedback and documenting best practices that can be shared across Florida. Their continued interest underscores the drill’s growing reputation as one of the most effective

and forward-thinking preparedness exercises in the region.

**TRAINING FOR THE HUMAN
 SIDE OF EMERGENCIES**

One of the distinguishing features of West Palm Beach’s drill is its emphasis on human-interaction challenges, an often overlooked but critically important factor.

During the simulation, crew members encountered trained volunteers acting as distressed residents. Some searched for missing pets. Others demanded faster

service. Still others called out for loved ones who were “trapped” or unaccounted for. These scenarios forced teams to apply empathy and strong communication skills while maintaining safety protocols and operational priorities.

For public works personnel, often among the first to enter neighborhoods after emergency responders, these encounters are common. The drill ensures crews have the confidence and clarity needed to support residents during moments of fear or frustration.



Actor portraying upset resident.



Other Departments on hand to observe.

LEADING THE WAY IN
**HURRICANE
 PREPAREDNESS**

“This full-scale drill has become a cornerstone of the City’s emergency readiness strategy and a model municipalities across Florida are beginning to emulate.”

A GROWING MODEL FOR MUNICIPAL PREPAREDNESS ACROSS FLORIDA

Because of its scale, realism, and measurable structure, West Palm Beach’s annual hurricane drill has become a model other cities hope to replicate. Coral Gables, Boynton Beach, and Riviera Beach joined the 2025 exercise not simply to observe but to study the operational and logistical framework behind it.

West Palm Beach’s commitment to transparency, knowledge-sharing, and innovation reflects a broader philosophy: preparedness is a community investment, not a competitive advantage. As storms intensify across the Atlantic basin, Florida’s municipalities increasingly look to one another for proven practices that save time, reduce costs, and protect lives.

WHY THIS ANNUAL EXERCISE MATTERS

Hurricane response is one of the most complex responsibilities local governments face. Without deliberate, recurring practice, even experienced teams can fall behind when the unexpected occurs.

West Palm Beach’s annual drill helps solve that problem by:

- Reinforcing operational readiness
- Strengthening interdepartmental relationships
- Testing equipment, technology, and logistics
- Building organizational muscle memory
- Enhancing public confidence

Each year adds a new layer of learning, and each drill becomes an opportunity to refine the City’s approach.

A PROVEN, SCALABLE MODEL FOR FLORIDA’S PUBLIC WORKS COMMUNITY

As public works agencies statewide face increasingly complex storm seasons, West Palm Beach’s full-scale hurricane drill offers a replicable blueprint built on realism, collaboration, outside evaluation, and continuous improvement.

After five drills over the past six years, the City’s commitment is clear: West Palm Beach is not only prepared, it is leading the way. ✨

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