

Susan: Today we're going to be discussing preparations that hotel operators who live in a hurricane threat coastline should be undertaking as we head into the start of the hurricane season. Joining me today is a General Manager with a considerable amount of experience as it relates to hurricanes. He has over 30 years' experience in the hotel industry and during those years, he has managed through 12 hurricanes including hurricane Isabel back in 2003, and more recently hurricane Irene in 2011, which caused him to have to evacuate the hotel and close down. He works for East Coast Hospitality and is currently the General Manager at the Holiday Inn Express and Suites in Suffolk, Virginia. Please welcome to the show Bryan Jackson.

Bryan: Thank you.

Susan: Hopefully many of the hotels that are located in a hurricane threat coastline have already done a lot of the pre-season preparations so that's where I want to start with some of our questions for you today Bryan. When do you start to prepare for the hurricane season?

Bryan: I really try to prepare all year long, but I really get zoned in on it in late April, early May. With the winter being over at that point, I look for trees around the property that may have passed away or have been damaged, or the adjacent properties, any loose siding or shingles, anything on the roofs, buildings. Get those fixed ahead of time.

Susan: Right. So anything that could potentially be a projectile.

Bryan: Right, or would fall on somebody's car or the building for that matter.

Susan: You mentioned adjacent properties. How do you deal with that? You notice that your neighbors have some potential hazards, is it just matter of going over and knocking on their door? Or contacting them to work together to clean it up?

Bryan: That is usually what we would do. When I was in Hampton, we didn't have anybody adjacent to us so it was simple. It's all ours. Here in Suffolk, I do have a National Guard Armory to my right and there is a vacant property directly behind me. The left side and front . . . the front's ours and the left side is a shopping center so there's no trees there. The armory is easy to contact those people who run that. The vacant property behind us . . . if it's within a few feet of the property line I will have the issue taken care of and just let them know it happened.

Susan: Well that certainly is some of the important things to take care of before the season even gets underway. How about in terms of things that you stock up in advance? I'm sure there's a lot of things that you need to stock up on, and some things are okay to do well in advance but other things with a shorter shelf life maybe need to be waited on. Tell me a little about some of the items that you want to make sure you're well stocked with.

Bryan: We want to have batteries, flashlights. [Glow sticks](#) are a wonderful thing to use in the hallway because they're non-toxic and do a very good job at lighting up the hallways. If a hurricane approaches, I would do this: which would be to keep one gallon of water, looking at my occupancy, per person per day for a three day period. We have a propane grill on property so I'd also keep that and enough propane for a few days in the storage outside. You definitely don't want to keep it indoors. It's also good to have battery-operated power tools, such as drills, I have a electric . . . well it's electric but you can use it off a generator, chainsaw. Pack ice and coolers if the storm is actually coming your direction, you also want to have a battery-operated weather radio because once the power goes, your TV's not going to be of any use to you.

I also try to rent, because we don't have on property, two generators. One to solely run the front office computers, that way we're still getting pertinent information and we can use the internet if it's still up at that point for information as well. And the other one's to run my refrigerators and one ice machine. Non-perishable food, that would come as it gets closer. I would get some canned goods, but being an Express, I'm kind of limited in my space. So it's mostly the breakfast items, the cereals, cinnamon buns, even the biscuits and bread has a shelf life. Stuff like that. We could still feed the employees and feed the guests. It minimizes the impact.

Susan: In your past experience with hurricanes, are there some things that you advise them to stock up for their own food supplies in advance?

Bryan: I do. Also if it's an immediate impact . . . we're in Suffolk, we're not exactly right on the coast so the impact is going to be less than if we were on the water, but if it's coming directly at the city, my concern is more for the customers than the say, the money. I'll suggest they may go inland, but with the ones that want to stay, I'm going to tell them, "Make sure you have some type of food that's not perishable: crackers, cookies, bread, peanut butter, something." Because when we lose power, our refrigerators in our rooms are going to be useless. We are luckier than most . . . we are on a hospital grid so the power's not going to be down for any longer than it has to be.

Susan: That makes a huge difference. If you're on that hospital grid, you know you're going to get your power back up sooner. Of course the sooner your power's back up, the easier it becomes. How about the involvement of other staff members at your hotel? Do you have roles defined? And who chips in when and what are their responsibilities are in terms of preparing for the hurricanes, as well as what their role is in the midst of it once the hurricane is in full force in your area?

Bryan: As far as me, I'm in charge of everything. But the front office manager's is going to handle the front desk side. The guests to a point, I'm going to be available for all of them, of course. The engineer would take care of bringing in trash cans, pool furniture, making sure if we have any flooding due to heavy rain, that we're able to take care of that. I also keep my sales manager on property just as another hands-on person. Also housekeeping staff, we're bringing them in. Suffolk is low and it has a lot of water around it as far as riverside water, but it is tidal. Any of my staff that's in low-lying areas, I'm going to bring to the hotel or at least suggest that they stay at the hotel because we are on a high ground here. But as far as the . . .

Susan: So that becomes a safe haven?

Bryan: Right, exactly. Safe haven. As far as roles, I'll give you that as things come up. But as far as information, the front office manager's probably going to be my left arm, right arm because they're going to be take care of the initial guests inquiries, even staff inquiries to that point because I'm also going to be walking the floors, walking the building. If the hurricane is not too bad, I'll be outdoors checking on the property as well, cars, parking lot, making sure people stay indoors.

Susan: So what do you consider to be the most critical steps in preparing for a potential hurricane?

Bryan: Of course being ready, but making sure you have everything. Don't wait. If you wait, the shelves are going to be empty. You're not going to be able to get anything. Just being prepared ahead of time. I was a boy scout, the motto is "Be prepared." Just make sure you have everything you need and everything you think you're going to need because if you think you're going to need it, then you decide not to get it, you'll wish you had've bought it.

Susan: So better to be over prepared than under prepared, that's for sure.

Bryan: That's for sure.

Susan: I know back in 2003, it was hurricane Isabel that came up to your area. What were some of the things back then that you realized, "Wow, I'm glad I took care of this in advance." Or what were some of the things that you thought, "Wow. I wish I would have done this. It would have made things easier"? Were there some lessons learned from that hurricane?

Bryan: I was at the other hotel at that time. We did have our own property generator but it really hadn't been used in years. It worked fine. It came on and did what it was supposed to do but all it did was run partial power to the hotel. It didn't run the computers. It didn't run two of the walk-in coolers. We thought it would. Knowing that ahead of time, I'd have an electrician and you come in if you have a generator on property and making sure you know what it actually runs. We did rent and have on property portable generators, so we were prepared and were able to fix the issue by putting them outside, fire them up and hooking our computer system up and bring it back online, bringing some of the coolers back online, ice machines.

But mainly the generator that we had, and I'm not sure why, it ran the laundry for some reason. It also ran every other light in the hotel so the hallways were good. And we had plenty of fuel. Those weren't an issue, but we had had a lot of near misses over the last five or six years before Isabel. I don't think anybody was ready for the amount of down power lines and trees. Roads were inaccessible. The main things that you need to have, and this helps not only the guests, it helps the community, but be in contact with your local FEMA, local power companies, Virginia or whatever state you're in, the Department of Transportation, and your local emergency services, and have them set up in your hotel. That way you know what's going on. The guests feel more secure because they have emergency people on property and with local power . . . they can't stay in a hotel that doesn't have power so they're going to get to back up and running as quick as possible.

Susan: Right. So is there a process to get them there other than just reaching out and letting them know that, "Here I am and you're welcome to stay"?

Bryan: I contacted the local offices for all. Fortunately, there's a local office for Virginia power which is our power company, and the Virginia Department of Transportation right here in Suffolk. So that was really easy. FEMA I did have to contact nationally and was then given a local number and person to talk to. Of course the city, just contact the mayor, or there's emergency services numbers. Just call those people and reach out to them. Especially if they're in low-lying areas. Our local emergency services is downtown Suffolk which is kind of triangled on three sides, or two sides anyway with the river. They will actually probably flood if the wind pushes the river in. They were quite happy

to be asked to come to our hotel because the only other hotel in Suffolk is right the on the river. They didn't want to be using that because the water will flow up to it.

Susan: So it wasn't going to be a secure location.

Bryan: Right. Just reach out to them. I'm not sure in other states, power companies are different. In different parts of Virginia, you run into the co-op type power places. If you ask the right questions to the right people, you'll get the right people to get you the information you need.

Susan: So just get out there and ask.

Bryan: Yup. Especially Virginia Power, and for me being local I just went to their offices. That way you can put a name to a face and they can put a name to a face.

Susan: Yeah, that's a good idea. So if you have the opportunity to go face to face with them, it's going to get you a little further.

Bryan: Yup. Sure will.

Susan: Speaking of that, as far as mutual aid agreements with other hotels or even restaurants in the area, how do you work some of those things out?

Bryan: We have Ruby Tuesdays right in front of us. I'll set a few rooms aside for them to put their people in so that they can function and don't have to drive. Then they'll provide us with . . . I guess you could basically call a catered meal.

Susan: That's a great idea.

Bryan: We've done that. The last snow storm, was a nine inch snow storm, and I just went there and talked to the manager and said, "Hey. Maybe you have a hard time getting your people in here. They could stay at the hotel. I'll get you a couple of rooms. You feed my employees, I got a couple of guests that need food . . ." What they did was they just sent over a pile of food which we set up in the meeting room. With a hurricane, trees down and power lines especially, you really don't need to be navigating the roads. I have two housing neighborhood behind me and three across the street from me, and the Ruby Tuesdays and 7-11 are really their only . . . within walking distance, support. If they're open and running or at least able to function to a degree, those people

have an outlet. They can get food. They can get supplies from 7-11 if they have anything left.

Susan: Right.

Bryan: That helps the neighborhood as well, and the city and the community.

Susan: Certainly important things to think about in advance. Get those mutual aid agreements set up well in advance so that when the storm comes along, you're not trying to run around and figure out what to do.

Bryan: That's right. Exactly.

Susan: I love what you brought up about the generator. If you've got a generator on property already, know what it's connected to. Because I bet there's a lot of people that have generators and really don't get to put them to the test that often. Maybe they go through a test cycle but they really wouldn't know what powers back up when the generator kicks on.

Bryan: That was an important lesson I learned with that when it happened.

Susan: Because certainly you need emergency lighting to kick on in places and that's the point behind the generator. For many generators, it's one of their main purposes. But to know what additional outlets are going to come on and to get with an electrician to redirect it if you've got some outlets you really don't need to be working. Like even maybe the laundry room was critical but maybe there was . . . if you're limited in the amount of wattage output from that generator, there may have been some other electrical devices you would have rather routed power too.

Bryan: Yes, definitely.

Susan: So with regards to managing during the actual storm, let's say you're unfortunate enough to be right in the path of the storm. It's right on top of you now. You didn't evacuate because you weren't in an evacuation zone. You've got a hotel full of guests. What's some advice you could share around weathering through the storm?

Bryan: Just stay calm. If you stay calm and reassure the guests that the hotel's going to keep standing. With the weather radios, having the FEMA people and the local power and the emergency people on property, you know more about what's going on in the community. You can tell the guests what's going on, if there's damage here or flooding here. Just keep them reassured, they're fine.

Keep them busy. I keep games, like board games, and deck of cards. We have actually a few decks on property.

We set them up in the breakfast area. You have to be careful with windows though. If it's a bad enough storm, you don't want them in an area with windows. So the meeting room, there's less windows. That does have one window but it's a smaller window, it can be boarded. You just keep them busy. Keep their minds off of what's going on. With a generator, the local channels are able to keep functioning. Even cable nowadays, if it's still on, and then you have the lines still up, let them watch a little TV if you keep your power on. Anything to keep their mind off of what's going on outside because people do get nervous. Especially if they're from the middle of the country, they don't see hurricanes. Like I'd be nervous if I went to the middle of the country and there was a tornado.

Susan: And the only ones they've seen are the really bad ones that get broadcast on TV so they expect the worst.

Bryan: Right, exactly. Those times, especially . . . We're lucky, like I said, there's not much around us that becomes projectile or trees that will fall. There are things they do have to watch but just keep them occupied. And if you stay calm, for the most part they're going to stay calm. If you have one that's not calm, you take them into your office and you explain to them how their behavior is affecting others and then just go. Then handle whatever comes.

Susan: Then you probably want to limit the alcohol. I know you're an Express property so you don't have a full service bar, but you don't want to turn it into a big hurricane party, although you want them to be occupied with some games or feel like they're not alone and get them comforted in some way. I know there's been horror stories out there of hotels that have turned it into a hurricane party and got out of hand with drinking, and then that leads to even more problems.

Bryan: You want to limit alcohol if at all possible, I agree. Because that just makes people more apt to go outside because they think they're Superman. If they're already contentious about the storm, it's just going to make it worse.

Susan: Right. And there's nothing you can do with them at that point once the storm's on, you're stuck with them. There's no kicking them out.

Bryan: Yeah, exactly. Yes. We can't throw them out. Right.

Susan: How about pets? I know that's another issue that comes up a lot in terms of hurricanes and shutting down the hotel or closing up where you can't go

outside but yet you might have some guests with pets. What are some things around dealing with that situation you could share?

Bryan: I'm a pet owner myself so I've been this route where you can't take them out, and my dog sees rain and won't go outside. I have what they call [puddle pads](#) on property. Basically they're more paper, almost like a . . . used in the hospitals, they put them under you in bed if you had an operation. It absorbs liquids. Sometimes it's hard to get the dog to go on them. Fortunately my whole lower floor is tiled. So if there's accidents, it's not that catastrophic. But I try to keep those on property.

Susan: Good idea.

Bryan: The owner wants to take the dog outside and the winds not blowing 100 miles an hour, I may let them go out the side entrance because I have a big field next to me. Open and there's nothing in it. But you have to be careful. We will allow pets on property for emergencies like that, generally we don't just because of the upkeep. But I'm not going to say no to somebody because they'll go back to their house and weather out storm and may get flooded, and bad things happen just because I wouldn't let a pet in my hotel. We will let them in. We'll do our best to keep it sanitary.

Susan: Yeah. There's a humanitarian factor that kicks in when the hurricanes are out there. You've got to bend the rules a bit in favor of doing the right thing.

Bryan: Oh yeah. Right, exactly.

Susan: All right. We've covered a lot of the questions that I had. Is there anything that you feel like the audience would benefit from hearing? Is there some additional takeaways that you can think of that we haven't covered?

Bryan: I can't stress it enough. Just be prepared early. Don't await. In areas like Virginia where we're protected by North Carolina, storm's coming out the south or even from the east for that matter, we've had a lot of near misses, close calls. People get complacent. As soon as you get complacent, you'll get hit like we did with Isabel in 2003. Everybody kept saying, "It's coming, it's coming, it's coming," and everybody that lives here kept saying, "Oh, it's just going to be another near miss." The whole Hampton Roads area which is somewhere the neighborhood of two to three million people, a lot of people live here, it's a big area with seven cities, we were 99.9% powerless. And the state had 250,000 trees down.

Bryan: There's still two state parks in those area, they're closed because they never got all the trees up. It happened 15, 12 years ago. I guess it's more cost-effective not to reopen those. But just be prepared because the one time you're not is the time that you're going get hit. The storm's going to come and you're going to get more damage. They thought Isabel was going to go more north, ended up going south and we were on the worst side of the storm. We would get caught in the corner of it. There was damage as far as 100 to 150 miles inland.

Susan: Wow. Yeah. You can't really over prepare. You'd rather be over prepared than to get caught in the middle of a storm.

Bryan: Right. You have your own staff on property, your own self on property, you have customers on property. Now, they're all looking for the hotel and the company to protect them and have the stuff they need when it's all set and done.

Susan: So it becomes an opportunity to either shine and be a hero or you're going to get a lot of spotlight put on you for a failure.

Bryan: Exactly.

Susan: All right. Well, Bryan, thank you so much for taking the time to share this information with us. If any of the listeners had a question, wanted to reach out to you directly, would they be able to contact you? And if so, how would you like them to contact you?

Bryan: Sure. Email is probably best. It's bryan.jackson@eastcoasthospitality.net or I don't mind you calling: the phone number at the hotel is 757-923-1010. Here most of the time, it's an Express.

Susan: Thank you Bryan

Bryan: It's my pleasure.