



## City of Cape Coral Office of the Mayor

August 9, 2023

The Honorable Byron Donalds  
US House of Representatives, District 19  
1039 SE 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 308  
Cape Coral, FL 33990

Re: The Federal Government's Response to Hurricane Ian in the City of Cape Coral

Dear Representative, Donalds:

On September 28, 2022, Hurricane Ian made landfall in Florida, and the City of Cape Coral took a direct hit. This category-five hurricane devastated our community with heavy rains, storm surge, and extreme winds. The residents of Cape Coral are resilient, and immediately after the storm, began the long process of recovery. The City of Cape Coral, Lee County, the State of Florida, and the federal government have contributed to this recovery effort, with many efforts still ongoing. This storm tested and strained all our plans and resources. All involved have lessons learned.

As a recipient of the federal government's response, the City of Cape Coral had the following experience:

**1. Federal Emergency Management Agency Public Assistance Program - Site Inspectors**

A number of challenges were experienced due to the lack of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) site inspectors available to support this disaster. Through the FEMA Public Assistance process, inspections are a key step to ensure that all damage resulting from the disaster is captured and accordingly funded by FEMA. Furthermore, conducting site inspections prior to completing permanent repairs is a highly recommended best practice to ensure that all damage is captured accurately to avoid jeopardizing funding. The lack of inspectors has impacted the City's recovery process in multiple ways, such as delaying the formulation of projects for reimbursement and significant repairs to our community. Additionally, inconsistent interpretations of FEMA directives by site inspectors and other officials have led to the need for corrections to the site inspection reports, schedule of reinspections, and further delays.

The City recommends that FEMA obtain additional inspectors after a disaster and develop a simplified process in alignment with FEMA's policy for communities to document needed repairs to expedite the recovery timeline.

## **2. Disaster Recovery Center**

After the storm, it became apparent that a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) would be needed in the City. DRCs provide important resources for disaster survivors and are especially needed when the power and communications infrastructure are significantly damaged. After vigorously advocating for our community, on November 4, 2022, a DRC was finally opened in Cape Coral. Once opened, this DRC was one of the busiest for the incident.

The City recommends that additional DRC teams be assembled before a disaster and that they are deployed quickly after a storm disaster. Additionally, the City recommends having pre-approved DRC locations that can be expeditiously activated and operational following a disaster.

## **3. FEMA Individual Assistance - Direct Housing**

Following the storm, numerous homes in the City were uninhabitable due to storm surge or wind damage. Housing for these members of our community was difficult. Our community has limited emergency shelters, hotels, and apartments for temporary housing. Additionally, individuals want to remain in their neighborhoods, near their schools, church, and home, when possible. Delays in the processing of direct housing applications due to stringent requirements have led to residents remaining in uninhabitable homes or leaving our City to find housing.

The City recommends a streamlined application process for direct housing with input from local governments to expedite the implementation of this assistance.

## **4. Small Business Administration**

Getting our local economy going again after Hurricane Ian was a high priority. The City sought to partner with the Small Business Administration (SBA) to support our residents and local businesses. The City has a close relationship with the Cape Coral Chamber of Commerce and the Cape Coral Construction Industry Association. Both entities have reported lengthy delays in receiving assistance, with many still reporting that no approved SBA assistance has been received to date.

The City recommends enhanced public outreach to communicate SBA requirements and a streamlined process for SBA assistance applications following a disaster.

## **5. Federal Highway Administration Emergency Relief Program**

Prior to any permanent repairs occurring, the Federal Highway Administration Emergency Relief (FHWA ER) program requires there be an eligibility determination after a site review and a Detailed Damage Inspection Report (DDIR) is written. The Florida Division of FHWA has more stringent requirements that require a more extensive review process. This extensive review process caused delays in the completion of the permanent repairs to traffic signs, and in certain instances resulted in the loss of opportunity of funding as the City had no other option but to immediately address the safety issues that resulted from the disaster.

The City recommends that the Florida Division and the FHWA ER Program develop a streamlined process that allows jurisdictions to complete permanent repairs in an expedited manner.

The City recognizes that the road to recovery from Hurricane Ian is long. Assistance from the federal government continues to be essential to our community's recovery, and while there have been several challenges, there also have been successes.

The City looks forward to maintaining open lines of communication with the various federal agencies under the collaborative intergovernmental efforts that continue to be prevalent throughout this recovery process. This initiative will ensure the unmet needs, such as resilient and affordable housing, infrastructure, economic revitalization, and planning are met.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Gunter", with a stylized flourish at the end.

John Gunter  
Mayor, City of Cape Coral