

A satellite image of a hurricane, showing a clear eye and swirling cloud bands over a dark ocean surface.

Weathering the Storm: Strategies for Hurricane Preparedness

By Bill Larder



I joke on the jobsite that during the second half of the year, my job is part superintendent and part weatherman. That's because to prepare a jobsite for hurricane season, you need to evaluate and react to weather-related threats daily. I gather as much information as possible so when a named storm forms, there is enough time to make crucial calls that directly impact jobsite safety and project productivity.

I am currently the lead superintendent on a significant hospital expansion project in Wesley Chapel, Florida (northern part of the Tampa Bay region). The project involves constructing a three-story vertical tower addition, adding new patient beds for a healthcare client, being built on top of a three-story existing tower and converting two existing traction elevators into hydraulic elevators to serve the new bed tower addition. Construction is expected to last 15 months, during which weather preparedness has been and will continue to be vital to meeting project deadlines.

According to the National Hurricane Center, the Atlantic hurricane season typically lasts from June through November, with peak activity occurring between mid-August and late October. Although a storm's path is always unpredictable, preparing for the worst and hoping for the best is important.

The 2024 hurricane season has been a challenge for the entire Tampa Bay region, including the Wesley Chapel expansion. In late September, Category 4 Hurricane Helene made landfall in the Gulf region of the state; its eastern side impacted the jobsite. The eastern side of a hurricane is typically considered the most dangerous part due to the amount of rain and sustained winds. Then, just two weeks later, the jobsite was also impacted by Hurricane Milton, which crossed the Florida peninsula after making landfall as a Category 3 storm near Siesta Key. For a while the forecasts had Milton on a direct path of impact to the Wesley Chapel jobsite. Quick action was required to mobilize jobsite safety.

Batson-Cook has prepared a detailed hurricane preparedness checklist. Anytime we have a storm coming through, whether it's a tropical storm or a hurricane, we review this checklist and begin discussions about what strategies we're going to deploy to ensure we safely survive the storm.

To proactively prepare for Hurricane Helene and its forecast of 150-mile-per-hour winds, we immediately engaged key decision-makers. Given the significant threat posed by such a powerful storm, we knew early decisions would be essential to safety. Healthcare facilities like the one we are working on will remain operational throughout the storm, so there's an added challenge of collaborating with the client. For Hurricane Milton, as a precautionary measure, we made an early decision to dismantle the tower crane. Securing the necessary expertise to perform this task is important, especially during the approach of a hurricane when demand for such services increases. With the

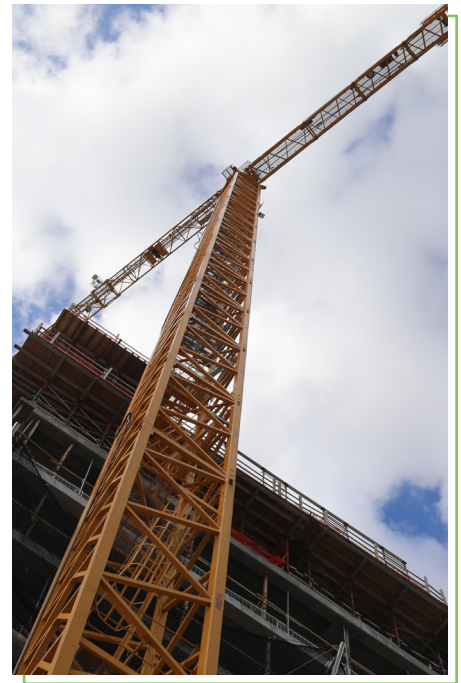
client's approval, we successfully removed the tower crane before the hurricane made landfall.

It's vitally important to keep the client updated and involved with decisions made on a project. This decision affected the cost and schedule; however, we aim to do what's best for the client and its operations during the storm.

We utilized drones to get a bird's-eye view of the construction site. This helps us identify any loose objects that could become dangerous projectiles in strong winds.

Another challenge we tackled quickly was rebuilding the skin of the building. We removed a section of the building's skin to tie in our vertical expansion to the existing structure of the tower, which left the building vulnerable to weather impacts. To protect the building, we quickly assembled a large team of about 50 people to reapply both the exterior and the secondary interior skin.

Another reason early decisions are important is because of the people who work with us and their need to take care of their families and property in preparation for a hurricane. In times like this, our entire team is also concerned for their families and their homes. If we know early enough that we have the time to make sure everything's secure at the jobsite, we can be certain that staff will have time to prepare personally.



When Helene arrived, three of us stayed at the hospital to ensure everything went according to plan. Some of the team live locally in Tampa, while others, like me, live more than an hour away. Given the circumstances, it made more sense for the three of us to remain at the hospital. Once the storm passed, we initiated text threads to check on leadership and field staff, ensuring everyone was safe and ready to remobilize the jobsite. Afterward, we needed to inspect the site for any damage and assess safe working conditions before proceeding. We had to balance our professional responsibilities with our personal lives, ensuring the hospital's needs were met while also providing flexibility for the team to address any damage to their homes.

I'd also like to stress the importance of maintaining a clean jobsite. On this project, we had just completed the demolition of an interior portion of the facility but had yet to start on the build-out. Because this area of the hospital was an empty shell and was already cleaned by our team, the hospital called us to see if they could use it as a bunking area for hospital staff as they weathered the storm on duty.

With enough advanced preparation, communication, and awareness, we successfully secured the project site and had zero leaks in the building. Having zero leaks even surprised the president of the hospital, who stated, "It is simply remarkable to have this size of the storm and have no leaks at all; that's amazing." Although none of us enjoy going through a major hurricane, it provides the stage to demonstrate to our clients our abilities as a trusted partner, our preparedness program, and our ability to keep their facilities dry in the worst conditions.

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