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Freeholder Candidates Present Evacuation Plans

County Remains Vulnerable while Incumbents Wait for State Rescue

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE--Democratic Freeholder Candidates Steve Bacher and Bob Jackson advocate improving evacuation plans, creating county emergency shelters in inland public schools, planning for pets and taking evacuation education to each municipality throughout the year.

“It’s time to rework the system when you have groups like the National Weather Service and NJIT saying your evacuation plan is inefficient,” said Bacher.

“When I ran in 2005, Steve Barry and I proposed a reverse lane strategy,” said Jackson. “While this will cut only a few moments off the total evacuation time, it was nonetheless absent from the plan at that time.”

The current Freeholders indicated a year ago that they look to the State and Federal governments to provide a regional evacuation plan. The Freeholders reiterated that stance at their meeting on September 11, 2007. Bacher and Jackson want to see the County take the lead in preparing for hurricanes and other emergency evacuations.

“At the end of the day it’s our citizens who are at risk, and it’s up to us to take responsibility,” said Jackson.

“All of the Freeholders should work with State Assemblyman Jeff Van Drew to get the Beasley’s Point Bridge open as soon as possible,” said Bacher. “We need every potential evacuation route open now. It’s a mystery why Freeholder Thornton is against working in a bipartisan manner to expedite opening the bridge.”

“The County should also set up a system in advance to identify people who are willing to evacuate in a first wave, three days in advance of a potential hurricane landfall,” said Jackson.

“These families would pre-register with the County and get automated phone calls and emails, along with radio and television notifications, when a storm threatens. This would take some pressure off the infrastructure that is needed to evacuate the entire county in the period 24 – 48 hours prior. There would also be a system for these families to confirm that they have left, by phone or internet. It would be a huge stride in ensuring the safety of every resident if you know who is here, and who has safely evacuated. You’ll save time and go to the people that are more likely to need the help when landfall is more imminent.”

“The county should also look into providing generators, food storage and cots for Lower Cape May Regional and Dennis Township schools to enable them to serve as short-term emergency shelters,” said Bacher. “In a severe weather situation, once the rain comes, many roads will be closed and people evacuating may not be able to get out of the County. At this time, I am told, the County has no emergency shelter sites for large numbers of people.”

“Another aspect of evacuation in which the County appears to be lagging is consideration of pets,” said Jackson. “Our pets are members of our family. Shelters should be organized to accommodate properly vaccinated pets in some rooms. We saw during Katrina that some people were reluctant to evacuate without their pets. There is no reason to exclude these family members. Having a plan that includes pets will help encourage people to cooperate in an emergency.”

Bacher and Jackson also propose that County Emergency Management staff provide educational evacuation information presentations in each municipality, and to high school seniors, each year. “A single seminar during the workday in September is nice, but it’s not enough,” said Jackson.

“The County should be doing more to bring its services to people from Cape May Point to Ocean City to Woodbine, and not make everyone come to Crest Haven,” said Bacher. “Evacuation education appears to have the same model as candidate debates: Freeholder Thornton is too busy to talk to people throughout the County, and Freeholder Bakley says this is the way we’ve always done it, and it’s good enough for him.”

“It’s time to think outside of the box,” said Jackson. “It’s time for a change.”

"Emergency evacuation plans are connected to the County’s effort, or should I say lack of effort, regarding doing its part to fight global warming,” said Bacher. “Again, the County needs to think creatively and take the lead, but the Freeholders aren’t interested. The warming of the ocean intensifies storms, and makes emergency evacuations more likely to be necessary. If Cape May County would lead and invest in wind and solar power (as Atlantic County has already done), actively encourage conservation and promote reduction of greenhouse gasses in government operations as well as at home, it will help reduce the possibility that we will have to evacuate due to a severe storm. Even people who question the reality of global warming understand that reducing the County’s dependence on foreign oil will save taxpayers money in the long run. And fewer severe storms would mean less money spent on beach replenishment. I’m not saying the County can stop global warming alone, but I do believe every level of government should do its part. Cape May County has water on three sides, 53 miles of shoreline, and it should take a leading role in this fight.”

More information can be found at www.bacherjackson.com or by e-mailing their campaign manager at todd@bacherjackson.com.

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