

From: Becker, Derrec <DBecker@emd.sc.gov>
To: Godfrey, RobRobGodfrey@gov.sc.gov
Adams, ChaneyChaneyAdams@gov.sc.gov
Symmes, BrianBrianSymmes@gov.sc.gov
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Subject: WSAV story: Beaufort Sheriff, SC Governor give different stories on reentry after Matthew

FYI:

Beaufort Sheriff, SC Governor give different stories on reentry after Matthew

By [hollybounds](#) November 14, 2016, 7:09 pm

Hilton Head, SC (WSAV) – After Hurricane Matthew passed, evacuees stuck close to your phones and TV's waiting for the call to come back home.

And it was that Sunday night after the storm that the South Carolina Emergency Management Division announced the evacuation order for Beaufort and Jasper Counties had been lifted.

Hundreds of families the road, only to find they weren't allowed back after all.

There are two sides to the story of why that happened and they come from the sheriff of Beaufort County and the Governor of South Carolina.

Press conference after press conference, email after email, Facebook posts and tweets, all made by the ones managing the evacuation and reentry to Beaufort County after the storm.

You can't say they kept quiet, but the messages delivered didn't match up.

"We had some communication glitches no doubt," State Representative Weston Newton said.

The smooth operation of getting tens of thousands of people out of Beaufort County before Matthew's landfall was soon overshadowed by the tension of getting back home.

"You have to have a plan for the return, and I think that failed big time," Angela Donoslovic said.

On Sunday after the storm, Beaufort County Sheriff PJ Tanner held a news conference which WSAV aired live on Facebook, laying out a plan for reentry to the county.

"We have to do it systematically in order for it to be done right," Tanner said during the press conference.

Simply put, if you lived on Hilton Head, Harbor, Hunting or Fripp Islands, there was no access, Tanner said in the press conference.

And if you chose to come back, Tanner said, you'd be staying at a shelter.

Tanner told NEWS 3 a phone call to the governor's team with that information was his next task.

"I went upstairs and followed through with what we talked about at the press conference," Tanner said. "And it was made clear during that time that Hilton Head was not open, it was closed and at that particular time we made it clear that the sea islands of Beaufort County were not open for return." But SC Governor Nikki Haley told NEWS 3 during a recent visit to Jasper County that a different message came through from Beaufort County officials.

"We made sure from the EMD director to the sheriff, who was over the EMD director, as well as I think the mayor and county council, we make sure we get the all clear before we lift any sort of restriction," Haley said.

The governor said based on what she heard local officials say, Beaufort County was safe for return.

"We rely on the county and to tell us when we lift the evacuation," Haley said in a press conference. Soon after she lifted the evacuation order, mass confusion and frustration set in.

"We didn't know what was coming so we left," a man said at the shelter at Bluffton High School.

"If you're just lying and telling me I can come home but I have to go to a shelter, I'm not going to vote for you," said another, who was there with his wife and two young children.

Despite what the sheriff said or didn't say, his deputies and other responders soon had hundreds of cars lined up- preparing to face the music of their home's damage.

But it wasn't until nearly two days later

road blocks finally came down and Hilton Head Islanders crossed the bridge.

It was a huge relief for people like Angela Donoslovic who spent two nights sleeping in her car at this gas station.

Her story is like that of dozens that came in to local leaders—who were admittedly just as confused.

"I fielded a lot of calls from people who spent five and six hours trying to get back in and I was trying to get good information and get it to them," Newton said.

"Unlike some of the other counties- people were upset in Beaufort County, former Governor and Congressman Mark Sanford said. "Basically there was miscommunication between who was in charge. State or was it local and wires got crossed as best I can tell and so I think there is going to be a lot of focus on after review and is it the sheriff's prerogative or is it the governor's prerogative in terms of reentry? I'll let them work it out but one thing I know is those kinds of things, given the amount of frustration, aren't the kinds of things that repeat themselves twice."

Tanner told NEWS 3 that while he's certain what message he sent the state emergency leaders, there are still a lot of lessons learned and ways to improve the reentry process after a disaster. The last time Beaufort County experienced a reentry was in 1959, when there were tens of thousands of fewer residents.

WEB EXTRA: The SC Emergency Management Division provided NEWS 3 with a timeline of Beaufort County's communication about the reentry:

"At 6:04 p.m. the SCEMD Chief of Operations contacted our state liaison officer working in the Beaufort EOC to confirm that Beaufort County officials wished to lift the evacuation order. While speaking with our liaison, Sheriff Tanner was passed the phone and he indicated he would like the evacuation order to be lifted at 6:30 pm. It was 6:10 p.m. We indicated that the coordination would take longer than 20 minutes to perform but the news release could stipulate the effective time of 6:30 pm. He indicated thus would be acceptable.

The Governor's entire Executive Group was consulted at the start of their pre-scheduled meeting held at 7:00pm. The group discussed ongoing operations and all agreed to carry out the county's request to lift the order. At that point, I exited the meeting and informed our SCEMD liaison officer, Sheriff Tanner and County Administrator Kubic over our liaison officer's cell phone that was set on speaker phone. All indicated receipt of the message and the Governor's news release was sent to the media based on consensus with all involved. Jasper County was also notified about the order lift and was also in agreement with the state and neighboring counties."

Derrec Becker
Public Information Officer
South Carolina Emergency Management Division
Mobile: [803.530.2193](tel:803.530.2193) | Office: [803.737.8500](tel:803.737.8500)
Online: scemd.org | Social: [@SCEMD](https://twitter.com/SCEMD)
Skype: SCEmergency

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