

*CNN Newsroom with Fredricka Whitfield*

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2:01:27 p.m.

4 minutes and 42 seconds

BORIS SANCHEZ: [T]here have been a lot of questions today about the timing of when Lee County ordered evacuations. We're in Lee County right now in Fort Myers. What we've learned is that Lee County ordered its first evacuations more than a day after forecasts met the county's criteria for evacuation despite the fact that the county has an emergency plan that suggests evacuations should have happened earlier. The county's comprehensive emergency management plan lays out that a 10 percent chance of six feet or more of water would indicate the need for hurricane evacuations in the most vulnerable areas. And the context here is important. A lot of Lee County is a vulnerable area. There was one road in and one road out in many of these parts of Fort Myers, heading into Fort Myers beach. That's part of the reason many of them have been cut off on Sunday when 4 to 7 feet surge advisories were first put out by the National Hurricane Center. That was three days before Hurricane Ian made landfall. The surge was predicted for an area from Englewood to Bonita Beach, which includes all of Lee County's posts (ph). Again, the evacuation order wound up going out Tuesday morning. That prognostication of what was coming was Sunday night. So I asked the sheriff about that today. Here was his response.

SANCHEZ: There are indications that Lee County's comprehensive emergency management plan was ignored. Lee County did not issue evacuation orders until Tuesday morning.

LEE COUNTY, FL SHERIFF CARMINE MARCENO: So let's talk about that, sir. I'm going to cut you off before you go any further. I don't know who you are, I don't know where you come from. Everyone wants to focus on a plan that might have been done differently. I'm going to tell you I stand 100 percent with my county commissioners, my county manager. We did what we had to do at the exact same time. I wouldn't have changed anything, and I know being in those meetings from the very minute, this storm was very unpredictable. And I stand right here. My fellow brother Chad Chronister was here from Hillsborough. I called him five hours when he got word that the storm was going to hit Tampa. And I said, sheriff, I'm sorry. I see the projected path. I'm going to send you everything that we have to help you. Well, that unpredictability, he called me back and said, Sheriff, look what we're talking about. That storm is now coming your way. We weren't even in the projected path or cone, ok. So I'm confident that we gave everything to this storm we should have at the right time and I think more so the governor had it right. He said after the cameras are here and they're long gone, you know, there's a thirst to be first, right. Everybody wants that information. For us it's about a commitment. It's not just the cameras. It's about moving forward in a positive way. And now let's focus on what's the right thing to do and how we could help the people that are in need. Next question.

SANCHEZ: Sir, if I may follow up, please?

MARCENO: Yes, sir.

SANCHEZ: Respectfully, my name is Boris Sanchez. I'm with CNN. I'm purely presenting the

questions that are being asked —

MARCENO: Of course.

SANCHEZ: by folks here on the ground who are reading these reports and reading this plan and wondering if something could have been done differently. We respect what you're doing now. We appreciate it.

MARCENO: Of course.

SANCHEZ: Again, respectfully, places like Hillsboro County, counties nearby Lee County evacuated, issued evacuation orders well before Tuesday morning when Lee County did. What do you say to residents who look at that and wonder why Lee County waited to do so?

MARCENO: And respectfully I say because of the projected path we were not even in the cone and the storm was slow moving about nine miles an hour, although it packed a horrific punch. The second that we could and should issue that order, I'm confident that we did. Again, we wouldn't change anything. And also, I also understand that there are some people that don't want to leave their homes. We cannot force them to leave their homes. That's their homes. But we can do everything we can to educate them and make sure they're aware of what's coming their way or possibly because, again this was so unpredictable, so I do stand by the plan that was in place. And I know that we did everything possible, respectfully, for everybody here, and I know that.

SANCHEZ: Just two quick points to point out, the storm did shift eastwardly at a relative time, quickly before landfall, and further, intensified very quickly from a category 3 to a near a category 5. Still at that same press briefing, the sheriff acknowledged 42 deaths here in Lee County, the majority of deaths so far in Florida from Hurricane Ian coming in this county. 42 out of 74 that we have tracked so far.

(...)

2:33:05 p.m.

1 minute and 35 seconds

SANCHEZ: Senator Rick Scott telling CNN's Dana Bash that he will press for answers to find out exactly what happened here in Lee County, one of the hardest where officials waited until there were fewer than 24 hours before Ian's landfall to give those evacuation orders. Keep in mind, 42 of those 74 killed in Florida were here in Lee County and that delay was despite the county's own emergency plan that called for the need to evacuate if there was just a 10 percent chance of six feet or more of water. Remember, the National Hurricane Center advisory has forecast up to seven feet of water three days before Ian hit. Evacuation orders were issued Tuesday morning. The National Weather Center issued that advisory Sunday night. So, we want to bring in Brian McNoldy now. He's a hurricane researcher at the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine, Atmospheric, and Earth Science. Brian, we're grateful to have your expertise with us today. Thank you for joining us. With a storm of this magnitude, nearly a

category 5, just a shade under category 5 sustained hurricane winds. In a coastal community like Lee County, 24 hours doesn't seem like enough time for people to get out.

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI's BRIAN MCNOLDY: Right, yeah, even in an area with fewer people, 24 hours would be a challenge. In an area that includes a city the size of Fort Myers and other surrounding towns like that. You definitely need more than 24 hours, yes.

SANCHEZ: And, Brian, other counties in Ian's path, besides Lee County, they spent the day Monday issuing evacuation orders. Tampa's mayor urging the public to evacuate, other public officials doing the same. Should that have been a warning for folks living in Lee County?

MCNOLDY: Well, it's — I guess there's a couple levels. You know, there's people who can choose to evacuate when they feel the threat is too high for their comfort, and then there's the evacuation orders coming from the county and, you know, they got the storm surge watch before the warning. of course. but the storm surge warning came out on Monday at 5:00 p.m., I think it was. And that's when, if it were me, I would have been starting to take action.