

*CNN Newsroom with Pamela Brown*

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5:03:21 p.m.

3 minutes and 9 seconds

PAMELA BROWN: So, we just heard a little bit there from Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, talking to our Nadia Romero. What else did he have to say, Jim?

ACOSTA: Yeah, Nadia Romero was asking Governor DeSantis about these questions that we've been hearing and frankly, they're not coming from us in the press. They're coming from residents here on the gulf coast of Florida. You know, people have been telling me as long as 24 hours ago when I was over in another part of this area, people are saying why wasn't the evacuation order issued sooner? We didn't realize we had to get out of this area when we did. We thought the storm was going to Tampa and so on. Now, granted, there are a lot of people who are battle-hardened Floridians and they just decided to ride the storm out. No question about it. That is certainly the case. But there are folks that we've run across anecdotally and I think just about every correspondent stationed down here has heard this time and again, that they just did not get that evacuation order soon enough. Now, my colleague, Boris Sanchez — as Nadia Romero was asking the governor just a short while ago, my colleague Boris Sanchez was at a press conference with the Lee County sheriff earlier today and was asking the sheriff here in Lee County about that evacuation order, why wasn't it issued sooner and here's what he had to say. He stood by the decision. Here's what he said.

LEE COUNTY, FL SHERIFF CARMINE MARCENO: 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.

ACOSTA: And so there you have it. You know, you have local officials, Pam, and there's just no other way to describe it, they're sounding very defensive about some of these questions that are being asked but, again, they are coming from local residents here and you're looking at the Lee County evacuation timeline on screen there. Sunday, 11:00 p.m., the National Hurricane Center mentions the four to seven foot storm surge possible for Lee County. Tuesday 7:00 a.m. Eastern, Lee County issues a first evacuation message. And then Tuesday, 11:00 a.m. Eastern, the forecast predicts 8 to 12 storm surges for Lee County. I will just tell you, Pam, you know, talking to residents here, you know, I was hearing, I mean, just earlier today from a resident that they were anticipating a storm surge that was much lower than what they ultimately got here. And so, it does seem as though, wires were crossed, there wasn't enough accurate information getting out. People were just not armed with the kind of information and evacuation orders that they needed to avoid the loss of life that we're seeing here right now.

BROWN: Yeah, and it's worth noting too and emphasizing that the Lee County emergency management site says that if storm surges got up to 6 feet, if that is predicted, there should be an evacuation. And as you just pointed out in that timeline, Jim, on Sunday, the National Hurricane Service said — it was predicting surges 4 to 7 feet in that area. Again, hindsight is 2020, but we

as CNN, are the vehicle for these questions coming directly from the residents speaking to you, Jim.

ACOSTA: Right.

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6:02:41 p.m.

3 minutes and 11 seconds

BROWN: And in Lee County, Florida, which accounts for more than half the statewide deaths there are questions tonight about whether residents were given adequate warning to leave. CNN's Nadia Romero put that question to Governor Ron DeSantis a short time ago. She joins us now from Arcadia, Florida. Nadia, what did the governor say?

NADIA ROMERO: Yes, Pamela, I mean, it was exactly what you talked about. We're talking about Lee County where we now know that they've done some 800 rescues, but more than 40 people dead in that county alone. The question was: Should they have had their mandatory evacuation earlier sooner, much sooner? And the governor doubled down again today saying that he stands behind Lee County having that mandatory evacuation order coming out on Tuesday morning even though surrounding counties, surrounding Lee County had their mandatory evacuation orders much earlier than that. Take a listen.

GOVERNOR RON DESANTIS (R-FL): I think probably for various reasons some people just don't want to leave their home, period. They're island people, whatever. But I think part of it was so much attention was paid to Tampa that I think a lot of them probably thought that they wouldn't get the worst of it. So you know, they -- but they did and I think it's easy to second-guess them but they were ready for the whole time.

ROMERO: Is that one of the things you'll be reviewing once we get out of the aftermath, people get their power back on, looking at those evacuation orders? Because even Lee County if they would have followed their evacuation orders from what we've reviewed, they should have had that mandatory evacuation order sooner.

DESANTIS: Well, but, you know, the issue, though, is also that there were a lot of -- they informed people and most people did not want to do it. I mean, that's just the reality. So, you're in a situation, are you going to grab somebody out of their home that doesn't want to? I don't think that's the appropriate use of government. I mean, I think that that takes it a little too far.

ROMERO: And the sad thing about what's happening in Lee County is the number of people dead but also that anticipation that the death toll will only rise as they're able to go house by house and pull back some of that debris and potentially find more people. The governor was here in Arcadia, Florida, that's where we're able to interview him, had that one on one, because this is one of the areas that saw that damage from Hurricane Ian but also many of their roads blocked. This is Highway 70 that is still very much a river four days later. Those are RVs you're looking

at, just spun around floating in the water there. This should be a highway that extends to two bridges and so people here can only get around by boat. You can see this boat leaving right now. This is how people are able to transport themselves around in this area. The governor came out by boat because that's the only way you can get here. And he was also joined by members of FEMA. We know that FEMA is on the ground here as well in this county. Pamela, the clean-up efforts will continue and so will those questions about the response. Was it adequate enough, and when you see those numbers continue to rise, more people that we know are confirmed dead, there are going to be more questions about that, Pamela.

BROWN: And we should note, we heard what Governor DeSantis said but we should note that, as you emphasize, Nadia, that residents there are questioning why they weren't told to evacuate sooner. And you are the vehicle for their questions to the governor. Excellent reporting, Nadia Romero, on the ground there in Arcadia, Florida.