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Vernon joins other towns in hurricane drill

By Jason Rowe , Journal Inquirer

VERNON -- A number of town officials sat in the community room of the Police Department on Thursday morning watching a projector screen depicting a large, but fictional hurricane taking aim at Fairfield County.

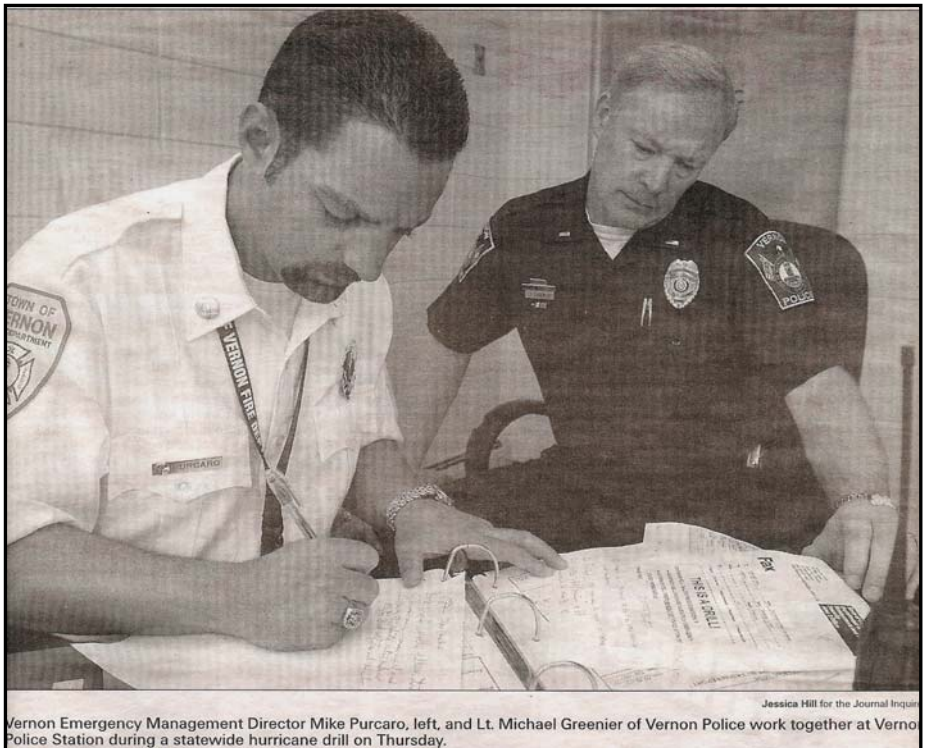
A storm of this magnitude would cause catastrophic damage to homes and businesses along the state's Gold Coast, and high winds and a storm surge likely would push residents inland.

Meanwhile, municipalities in interior Connecticut would have to contend with their own damage thanks to floodwaters, heavy wind, and rain.

On Thursday, Vernon joined more than 100 municipalities throughout the state in a drill of what would happen if a major hurricane were to hit the state.

And although the storm wasn't real, officials said Thursday's exercise was an important step toward being ready for the real thing.

"There's always going to be lessons learned," said Michael Purcaro, the town's emergency management director. "Through these lessons learned, we'll be prepared for the next exercise or real-world event. All emergencies begin as local emergencies."



Jessica Hill for the Journal Inquirer
Vernon Emergency Management Director Mike Purcaro, left, and Lt. Michael Greenier of Vernon Police work together at Vernon Police Station during a statewide hurricane drill on Thursday.

As part of the statewide exercise, Mayor Ellen L. Marmer ordered the partial activation of the town's emergency management center.

During the drill, seven officials including, Marmer, Purcaro, Town Administrator Laurence R. Shaffer, Fire Chief Robert Kelley, and police Lt. Michael Greenier continually staffed the center.

The three-hour drill, which was coordinated by the state's Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, was designed to simulate a hurricane beginning with the 24 hours leading up to the storm.

Shortly after 9 a.m., Vernon officials received a fax from the state saying the hurricane was 24 hours from landfall and that Gov. M. Jodi Rell had declared a state of emergency.

Shortly after receiving the initial communication, Marmer signed an order declaring a state of emergency in

Vernon and activated the town's emergency operations center.

As the morning progressed, officials received a number of faxes from the state updating them on the status of the storm.

Meanwhile, police and fire officials worked to prepare sections of the town that would be prone to flooding.

Purcaro, Kelley, and Greenier were especially concerned with neighborhoods in the northwest and southwest sections of town, along the Tankerhoosen and Hockanum rivers, which have been prone to flooding in past years.

Greenier recalled one storm about 25 years ago during which emergency crews needed special equipment to evacuate hotel guests who were trapped by a flood near the confluence of the two rivers in the southwest section of town.

By 10:20 a.m., a mandatory evacuation of flood-prone areas was ordered, a shelter was opened at Vernon Center Middle School, and the Police Department had brought in its second shift early and put its detective force back into uniform. Town firefighters also were put on standby in local fire stations.

Later in the morning, inland towns were asked to prepare to receive evacuees from the shoreline.

All of the orders were theoretical in nature and town services were operating normally Thursday.

But the most complex component of the town's portion of Thursday's drill was the testing of a new automated notification system.

The Wide Area Network system allows emergency officials to dial and notify a litany of officials without actually picking up the phone and talking.

During the drill, town department heads, Town Council members, and members of the media received automated phone calls alerting them that the emergency center had been activated.

Meanwhile, a computer screen alerted Purcaro when each message was received and acknowledged.

Those who did not receive the message on the first phone call would receive additional phone calls to their work phones, home phones, and eventually e-mail accounts.

Vernon is believed to be the only town in the state to utilize this system and officials, including Kelley, seemed to be impressed with how smoothly it worked.

"We haven't had a hurricane here since 1985," Kelley said. "It's been a long time. A lot of changes have occurred since the last time we had a hurricane here."

During Thursday's drill, Marmer said it's important for municipalities to see how their emergency plans function in case an actual disaster strikes.

"Making sure my town is well versed in a disaster scenario is important to me," Marmer said. "I'd like our citizens to have a comfort level that we are well prepared in case of an emergency."

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