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Burke looks to get help with storm expenses

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Since Hurricane Helene hit Burke County as a tropical storm, the county's bills have started to rack up.

The county hired a hauling service to pick up storm debris throughout the county. The estimated cost of debris removal is $3 million to $5 million, Burke County Manager Brian Epley said. The county will likely start getting billed for the service in the next month.

Another expense: County employees have worked overtime on storm-related issues. There are 156 county employees working on storm management who have been working 18 hours a day doing regular jobs in addition to storm management, Epley said. The team has worked at least 12 days straight without a day off.

The county also bought supplies such as ice and generators that failed because of flooding.

The county may get some of those expenses reimbursed by FEMA, Epley said. To get those reimbursements, the county is looking to contract with a firm to guide it through the process.

The county is seeking bids for comprehensive disaster recovery management services. The county would work with the service for up to three years, with two additional one-year optional renewal periods. The closing date for the bid requests is Oct. 24, according to county documents.

"The FEMA process for us may go on for two years," Epley said.

He said there are so many things to consider when it comes to getting reimbursed for storm damage, including tracking time county staff spend working on the storm, debris removal, all the emergency response and administrative work.

Epley said there are a variety of applications the county has to fill out on the FEMA website, be approved, and then go through a complicated process of submitting invoices for reimbursement. Many counties impacted by the storm will go through the process, Epley said.

"There are a tremendous amount of regulatory compliance metrics that have to be done appropriately to ensure that we govern, rebuild the right way and remain whole financially for what we do," Epley said. "And so this RFP will allow us to onboard (a firm) who's an expert in this industry, who can advise us on what's in our best interest, and then anything we pay to them contractually we also can file reimbursement for it. We expect to get that back."

WALT UNKS, WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Mimosa Hills shopping center at the intersection of U.S. Highway 64 bypass and Carbon City Road in Morganton was flooded on Sept. 28 from the Catawba River and remnants of Hurricane Helene.

Need FEMA assistance?

For Burke County residents who suffered damage due to the storm, the FEMA hotline 800-621-3362 is available every day from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

You can also visit **DisasterAssistance.gov,** or use the FEMA App.

To find other resources and information on recovery from the storm, the county has a webpage dedicated to it at **www.burkenc.org/helene.**

Burke County named health department of the year

BURKE COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Burke County Public Health was awarded the Dr. Sarah Morrow Health Department of the Year award by the North Carolina Public Health Association at its annual conference.

The recognition celebrates the department's achievements in program development, particularly in addressing homelessness and substance use disorder. The award acknowledges Burke County Public Health's efforts to tackle two of the community's most pressing public health challenges.

The department has implemented programs that provide services, support and resources to individuals experiencing homelessness and those affected by substance use disorder.

Burke County Public Health's approach includes interventions that cater to the needs of the populations it serves. By providing health care access and mental health support, the department addresses immediate needs while promoting long term recovery and stability.

The department continues prioritizing ongoing evaluation and adaptation of its strategies to meet evolving community needs. As Burke County Public Health moves forward, it remains dedicated to expanding its services and enhancing support for those facing homelessness and substance use challenges.

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED, BURKE COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Pictured, from left, are Behavioral Health Director Dr. Katie Varnadoe, Public Health Preparedness Todd Staton, Assistant Health Director Ashley Jarrett, Accounting Technician Rachael Palmer, Public Health Nurse Robin Clark, and Public Health Educator Samatha Simmons after accepting the award.

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