

Evacuation – planning, evacuating, and returning home

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A disaster has occurred. Evacuation offers the highest probability of survival. What are the “ABCs” of an evacuation?

Evacuations can generally be viewed in three phases:

- A. Planning and preparation;
- B. Executing the evacuation plan; and
- C. Return and recovery.

Within those phases, scenarios vary and dictate distinctly different responses. Knowing your options enhances your chances of success. Potential scenarios for evacuation include — but are not limited to — hurricanes/coastal storms, flooding, wildfires, hazardous substances and radiological events. While this article uses wildfires and hurricanes as scenarios for evacuation, other events could also be reasons for evacuation.

Planning and preparation

The St. James Emergency Management (SJEM) section of the Town of St. James (TOSJ) website

contains the resources for evacuation planning ahead of the event. Your planning needs to encompass two extremes — short notice and longer time to plan.

Short notice

Wildfires can travel up to six miles per hour in dry conditions. A wildfire that can't be contained and that is adjacent to St. James could be spewing embers and become a threat well before it jumps Middleton Road or Route 211. Reaction and execution times may be measured in minutes or hours. Can you be in your car, with your essentials, ready to evacuate in that time?

Longer planning

Hurricane evacuation notices usually allow time to secure your home and pack essentials. Having a plan makes more effective use of that time window. For example, in 2018, Hurricane Florence became a tropical storm on September 1st, a Category 1 hurricane on September 9th, a Category 4 on

Coastal Routes To I-95

- REST AREA / VISITOR CENTRE
- MUNICIPAL BOUNDARIES
- INTERSTATE HIGHWAY
- US HIGHWAY
- NC HIGHWAY
- SECONDARY ROUTE
- FERRY ROUTES

Routes are current
as of
08/22/2025



September 11th, with a projected Wilmington landfall of September 14th. Mandatory evacuation orders from the governor began on September 11th in a phased manner.

Preparation

The length of time you plan to be away is highly variable. If a wildfire is contained quickly, the time could be relatively brief. The worst case is not being able to return at all. Flood surges from hurricanes don't crest until days after the storm. In 2018, I-40 did not open to traffic until September 24th, ten days after landfall. Basic utilities such as power and water may take days or weeks to return. Hurricane Helene in western NC is a recent example of both of those. Return times may be measured in days or weeks.

Evacuating

The evacuation notices and timing will be announced by the TOSJ via email, text and voicemail. The State of North Carolina, Brunswick County, and TOSJ will update their websites to provide evacuation details. The start time for an evacuation is based upon several variables, including the projected time egress routes remain passable, the projected number of residents to evacuate, and anticipated bottlenecks.

The evacuation routes for each area of St. James are shown on the town evacuation map (see inset) and the Coastal Routes to I-95 map. If circumstances prevent any egress point from being safe, that information will be shared by SJEM and POA announcements. Traffic control outside St. James falls to the jurisdiction of the county and state.

Travel should be away from the event, including away from any expected path of the event and any other areas the event may impact. Brunswick County manages public shelters to accommodate those who are unable to evacuate. The county will

provide the status of what is open and what each facility can accommodate via the county's website.

Return and recovery

Damage assessment by the St. James Emergency Management Team (SJEM), the POA, and Troon begins as soon as conditions safely permit. The SJEM Team will actively monitor the status of access routes back into St. James, the status of public utilities, and the availability of essentials such as food, water, and gas in the local area.

Summary

Evacuations are a real possibility for multiple scenarios, many of which are either likely or highly likely in southeast North Carolina. Useful evacuation-related information can be found on the Emergency Management websites for the Town of St. James, Brunswick County, and the State of North Carolina.

While each individual and family must weigh their personal situations, consider a philosophy shared in aviation and adopted for evacuations: It is better to be away from St. James wishing you were home, than being in St James wishing you were away.

Links to all websites referenced in this article can be found in the Emergency Management section of the Town of St. James website: townofstjamesnc.org

