

BACK IN PLAY

Parks & Recreation makes a comeback from Hurricane Ian

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Four months after Hurricane Ian, county and city parks and recreation departments are scrambling to get facilities up and running.

While many residents are thankful their favorite amenities are open, others are wondering when it will be their turn to play. Parks officials who have heard complaints ask people to have patience, know that the work is going on and that amenities will open as soon as they are safe.

CHARLOTTE COUNTY

Charlotte County was hit hard by Hurricane Ian — harder even than Charley in 2004, which destroyed facilities in South County near Punta Gorda, but caused significantly less damage to mid-county and west-county parks.

“We have 100 facilities, and all of them in some way, shape or form were damaged by Hurricane Ian,” said Tommy Scott, Charlotte County’s director of Community Services.

The county’s goal is to bring them all back online

SEE **PLAY, 4A**



SUN PHOTO BY CHRIS PORTER

Tom Gaff draws a bead on a batting practice pitch during Senior Softball League workouts Thursday at the Englewood Sports Complex. Players can still sign up for the league’s spring season.

PLAY

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as soon as possible.

Some are back, some are in the works and some will take more time.

The county is dealing with issues much like a resident with home damage following the storm. Some facilities are covered by insurance. Some are eligible for FEMA reimbursement. Some damages aren't covered by anything, and the county will have to find money for an out-of-pocket expenditure.

Each one of those scenarios has its own process. County officials have to deal with insurance adjusters — just like a homeowner — documenting damages, submitting a claim, waiting, maybe negotiating. They have to do the same when they apply to FEMA.

That explains why some amenities are back in use and others are still closed, even at the same park site.

An example would be the county's four regional parks, like Ann & Chuck Dever Regional Park, with a rec center, youth football fields, fitness trails, swimming pool and the JM Berlin Skate Park.

The fences, lights, bleachers are all covered by insurance. When the insurance company approves payment, replacement fencing and lights can be procured and then fixed — provided the replacement materials can be found, which can be another problem.

Then there are the picnic tables, shade structures and other amenities. Those could be eligible for FEMA money, but only after it's applied for and approved.

Beyond that are "landscaping, trees and a whole myriad of other things,"



Jim MacKay

XXXXX gets ready to swing during batting practice for the Senior Softball League at Englewood Sports Complex on Thursday morning.

that are not covered by either insurance or FEMA — as most homeowners have learned. County staff and commissioners have to look at the budget and decide what can be replaced, how it can be paid for and prioritize everything.

Even when something is approved and paid for, getting the needed materials can still be a challenge.

"We had supply chain issues before the storm. This has only exacerbated the situation," Scott said.

The other side of the supply-and-demand equation — demand — increased greatly when all the lights at all the baseball fields, tennis courts, school football fields in Lee, Charlotte and big chunks of Sarasota and Collier counties were blasted on the same day.

"We just ask that people be patient," Scott said. "We're working hard to get these amenities back open. Our No. 1 priority is safety. We can't open facilities until they are safe for people to use."

To track the status of Charlotte County parks online, visit bit.

ly/3kJKL1p.

SARASOTA COUNTY

Of the county's 150 parks facilities, many sustained damage and some were hit hard. Also, in the wake of the storm, some were repurposed to help with recovery.

For the Englewood Sports Complex on River Road, it was all of the above.

Long the home of softball, soccer and youth baseball play in Englewood, the complex lost lights, fences and scoreboards. Trees and limbs were everywhere, and dugouts and buildings were torn up.

Soon after the storm, and as cleanup there began, the complex became a staging area for power crews and tree-cutting crews arriving in Englewood. It was then converted to a debris management site, with trucks bringing in large loads of debris that were ground down to mulch, which was then hauled out.

Some debris work is still being done there, so even though most of the park has reopened, access

is still limited to the Pine Street entrances.

The recreation center at the Englewood Sports Complex suffered roof damage and was out of commission. That has since been fixed, and the center is open to the public.

Most ballfields there are back in use, however some don't have lights, meaning games on those fields can only be played during daylight hours.

That's a concern, as youth baseball and softball season is about to start.

"The county has lights back up on one field right now, and they say they'll have the rest of them by the end of February," said Sean Kirsten, president of Englewood Youth Baseball.

The timing should work out, Kirsten said. Tryouts are coming up and practice will start soon.

Board members and other parents spent a lot of their own time cleaning up and starting repairs on the concession and equipment building, the dugouts, bleachers and batting cages.

In fact, the board recently thanked Quality

SUN PHOTO BY CHRIS PORTER

Flooring for installing new artificial turf in the cages this week.

Meanwhile, county crews repaired fences and have worked to get the fields back into playing condition, Kirsten said.

Soon, all ages of players from T-ball to majors and minors and juniors will be taking to the fields.

Senior softball players, who practice and play in the morning, say the fields are ready to go for their spring season. The league has its teams in place, and the supplementary draft for some age divisions is Wednesday.

This scenario is playing out in many of the county's parks, including Walt Rothenbach Park in Sarasota, a regional baseball and softball hub that's also being used as a debris management site.

Shortly after the storm, the county's Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources began evaluating all of the parks with a full damage assessment, explained Nicole Rissler, director of Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources for Sarasota County, in an email to *The Daily Sun*.

County employees documented damage and how much debris needed removing.

Then they prioritized the parks by a combination of usage and damage-debris. Cleanup and repairs started soon after.

Parks were reopened when they were deemed safe to use.

"Once the proper evaluation and clean-up has occurred to make the park safe and accessible for visitors, we reopen," Rissler wrote in an email to *The Daily Sun*.

Some of the county's nature parks, like Sleeping Turtles Preserve South near Venice, and the Ainger Creek Trails off Winchester Boulevard

near Englewood, are still closed.

"Staff is still evaluating, and debris being cleared from the trails to make it safe for users," said Rissler wrote.

Deer Prairie Creek Preserve, which is also undergoing an improvement project, is still closed this week, as are:

- Nightingale Park
- Oak Cathedral

Preserve

- Pinelands Preserve
- South Gate Circle
- Walton Ranch

To see an updated status sheet for all Sarasota County parks, visit bit.ly/3WzD76N.

CITY OF VENICE

In the city of Venice, all parks are in working order, according to Assistant Public Works Director Ashlee Castle.

That doesn't mean there isn't still work to do.

The city's Wellfield Park, which hosts soccer, baseball, softball, youth football, croquet and many other sports, suffered damaged and functioned as a debris management site for the city.

"The lighting at Wellfield Park should be complete this week, and then the crew is moving to Chuck Reiter Park," Castle wrote in an email to *The Daily Sun*.

Still on the list to fix are fencing, dugouts and roofing at Wellfield.

"But it is not impacting use of the park," she wrote.

At Chuck Reiter fields, the fences are fixed.

"Scoreboard replacement at Chuck Reiter has started and a contract has been issued for dugout repairs. At this time, I believe the only item impacted is night-time play at Chuck Reiter on Fields 2, 3 and 4," she said.