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Navigating Post-Hurricane Recovery

Key Considerations for Homeowners

In the wake of Hurricane Helene and Milton, many homeowners are facing the daunting task of recovering from significant storm damage. Alair Homes Tampa and Alair Homes Redington have received numerous inquiries from affected residents seeking guidance on their options. The storm brought high winds and a surge of saltwater that impacted both waterfront and inland properties. If you find yourself in this situation, understanding your next steps is crucial.

Assessing Damage and Restoration

After the storm, the first step is to assess the damage. A loss adjustor can provide a comprehensive evaluation before you engage a restoration company. Your insurance company may send one to you, and you can engage one yourself.

Next you are going to need to have a restoration company;

1. **Remove Damaged Materials:** Restoration professionals will strip out compromised trim, doors, drywall, cabinetry, fixtures, appliances, and materials.
2. **Prevent Mold Growth:** Dehumidifiers are essential to mitigate mold risks in the aftermath of flooding.
3. **Mold Assessment:** Should there be suspicion or evidence of mold, engage a third party qualified inspector to test for and, if necessary, treat any mold found.
4. **Know The Moisture Level:** As part of the mold assessment get a moisture reading for the framing in particular. Moisture levels over 10% can lead to mold forming later on. Keep these assessments in your files for future sale of the property. Realtors and purchasers are going to ask for this data before buying a property.
5. **Safe, Secure and Sanitary:** You have a right to do whatever is necessary to your property to protect it, until such time as you are ready for the next steps.

In Florida, a homeowner has a responsibility to take reasonable steps to limit property damage once a covered event occurs, including taking immediate action to prevent further damage, contacting the insurance company promptly, and making necessary emergency repairs to mitigate losses; failure to do so could result in a denied or reduced claim depending on the specific circumstances and policy terms.

These initial mitigation efforts, while initially out of pocket expenses, should qualify as reimbursable items under your insurance policy.

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What Next?

It's vital to avoid rushing into any contract without exploring all available options. Each homeowner's circumstances are unique, and careful consideration can protect your investment.

Key Questions to Consider

1. Is renovation worth it?

Before deciding to renovate, ask yourself:

- **Insurance Considerations:** What is the expected insurance payout? Will it cover your renovation costs? When? If you renovate a property that is below the base flood elevation are you going to be able to get insurance?
- **Future Flood Risks:** Are you prepared to invest in a property that may flood again, especially with construction costs rising approximately 7% annually?
- **Value Retention:** Will your renovations add value to an older property that's below flood zone levels and not up to current construction standards?
- **Flood Zone:** What is your current elevation and what is the base flood elevation? <https://msc.fema.gov/portal/home>
- **FEMA Regulations:** Understand the Substantial Improvement rules, which limit spending to 50% of the appraised value of your home (excluding land value). https://www.fema.gov/pdf/floodplain/nfip_sg_unit_8.pdf
- **Look-Back Period:** Many jurisdictions will look at work carried out in the past and include the cost within the Substantial Improvement calculations. The time period they look-back varies.
- **Construction Cost Calculations:** When applying for a construction permit you will be required to complete a Substantial Improvement packet of information, including a construction cost assessment. This assessment will need to be below the 50% threshold. The city will look to see where the data has come from. Licensed General Contractors, Department of Labor rates, homewyze.com, Loss Adjusters, etc. are all sources most jurisdictions will accept cost estimates can be based on. There is no such thing as free labor, or donations, when it comes to renovation work being assessed.
- **Elevation Potential:** If considering elevating your home, can it be lifted above flood elevation without damaging the structure? Your home was probably not engineered to withstand such movement. If you do elevate the property, it still remains an older home, therefore is that money, plus the repair costs after, going to be recouped?

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- **Available Grants:** Investigate any government or FEMA grants that could assist with storm damage. Hazard Mitigation Grant Program and FMA Swift Current Grant are two. <https://www.floridadisaster.org/dem/preparedness/grants-unit/>

2. What is your property worth on the market?

Understanding your property's market value is crucial. Consider:

- **Market Saturation:** Consult with a local realtor to gauge the current market conditions and property values. Also consider the effect on the market if it is saturated by land sales.
- **Demolition vs. Renovation:** Would demolishing the property be more beneficial? While demolition can cost \$8,000 or more for a single-story home, it may be a strategic move in a saturated market.
- **Unique Waterfront Value:** Remember, you cannot recreate waterfront property, which often holds significant value. <https://www.pcpao.gov/> <https://gis.hcpafl.org/propertysearch/#/nav/Basic%20Search>
- **Stage the Lot:** We can provide renderings and signage to show potential purchasers what they could build on your lot. With a saturated market, this may be the edge you need to stand out.

3. Should you build new?

Know your budget before you talk to builders. We cannot estimate the cost to build your vision - there is no such thing as a price per square foot unless what you want has already been built - how much is a bag of groceries? Look at your finances and talk to lenders to establish what you can or want to spend.

Knowing the budget will not only ensure time is not wasted designing something that will never be built, but will also enable a builder to manage your expectations.

Building new can be the best long-term investment, but it requires careful planning:

- **Cost Transparency:** Work with builders who can provide accurate cost estimates without inflated mark-ups. An open-book approach enables you to avoid hidden mark-ups and benefit from contractor's buying power.
- **Patience in Process:** Understand that rebuilding takes time. Avoid shortcuts; a reliable builder will follow a structured process that starts with concept design, surveying, and budgeting.
- **Teamwork:** Building a home requires a team effort - the General Contractor, Architect, Structural Engineer, Energy Engineer, Surveyor, Civil Engineer and City Inspectors are all working for you to turn your vision in to reality.

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- **Builder Selection:** Choose a trustworthy builder with a solid reputation. Check their license, insurance, financial health, resources, accounting methods, contracts, etc. This could be the biggest investment of your life - protect it. They should guide you through the process, just as a surgeon would before an operation.
- **Planning is Key:** Avoid committing to construction contracts until all information is gathered. Poor planning can lead to costly change orders and unexpected expenses. Insist your builder uses the permitting period to give you a very detailed cost breakdown, specification and scope of work for the project. Every allowance should be detailed out before construction and hopefully be a fixed cost before you sign a contract.
- **Architect Collaboration:** If starting with an architect, involve a builder early to ensure the design aligns with your budget and construction realities.
- **Financial Options:** Explore available loans or grants for rebuilding, including interest-free Small Business Administration, Disaster Loan options up to \$500,000 (<https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/disaster-assistance>).
- **Taxes:** Most, if not all, jurisdictions will not increase your taxes, providing you build a new home, to the same square footage or less. Check with your local Property Appraiser's office.

Conclusion

While the aftermath of the Hurricanes presents many challenges, taking a systematic approach to recovery can empower homeowners to make informed decisions. By evaluating your options carefully and seeking professional advice, you can navigate the rebuilding process effectively and protect your investment for the future. Remember, every situation is unique, and tailoring your strategy to your specific needs will lead to the best outcomes.

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