

The Lee County Horizon Council is a 62-member, public-private board that advises Lee County Commissioners on economic issues. It works to improve Lee County's business environment, retain and encourage expansion of existing businesses and attract new and diversified employment.

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Despite the current drought-like conditions, rainy season is just around the corner. That means the tropical storm season is nearly upon us.

Hurricane season — June 1 through Nov. 30 — is something residents across Southwest Florida are encouraged to prepare for, but it's also important for business owners to create their own preparation plans.

Such disaster plans can help not just with hurricanes but also with other natural and manmade disasters. Of course, violent and massive tropical storms are the greatest threat to Lee County business owners.

You can help yourself now prepare for later. Keep in mind — it's worth it. A well-crafted plan can save your own livelihood and your employees' jobs. Just look at a basic statistic.

"Following a major disaster, almost 40 percent of small businesses never reopen, leaving many business owners unemployed," said Monesia T. Brown, director of the Agency for Workforce Innovation.

"Much of this economic misfortune can be avoided if businesses take the time to devise a plan," she said.

How to do it? Don't go it alone.

Business owners can register now with the Business Emergency Network by going online to the Lee County Economic Development Office web site at www.LeeCountyBusiness.com. However, if your business is already registered there is no need to register again.

The Business Emergency Network offers a free, confidential registry that enables a centralized link so registered business owners and leaders can be kept apprised of current actions and conditions surrounding the event.

The Business Emergency Network — or BEN — also serves as a supplier network, connecting your company with people who need materials and services during post-disaster recovery.

Another important thing to tackle before hurricane season begins is to create a comprehensive disaster plan for your business.

These plans not only address the personal safety of employees but also the needs of the business community during the response and recovery stages of a disaster.

The EDO works closely with Lee County's cities, county government, public agencies and the business community to ensure the emergency preparedness information you need for business survival and recovery is readily available.

To create your own disaster plan now, go online to the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council's web site at www.swfrpc.org/preparenow/workbook.htm

Like the BEN service, this informational help is free to you and your business.

Another tool for you to use to create your own customized disaster plan is online as well. Go to www.FloridaDisaster.org.

Small business owners can also learn about available assistance for the upcoming hurricane season by attending a Hurricane Preparedness Seminar on Tuesday, June 5, 2007 from 3:30 pm-5:00 pm in the EDO Boardroom at 12800 University Drive, Suite 325 in Fort Myers.

The format will be educational and informational relative to pre disaster mitigation and post disaster planning, plus all aspects of business recovery, business loans, and unemployment assistance. The program is free and registration is required. Businesses can register at: <http://cli.fgcu.edu/sbdc>

The Small Business Development Center and the Horizon Council urge business leaders and small business owners to protect their employees and themselves by creating and making staff aware of a disaster preparedness plan — before the 2007 hurricane season begins.

— *Sue Noe is a Business Assistance Manager with the Lee County Economic Development Office.*