**Hurricane Irma Executive Summary**

Mayor and Council Members, it looks like I am ending my first year as your City Manager in the same way I started it: with a briefing on the City’s efforts to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a hurricane.

Before recapping our activities, I’d like to extend our sincerest sympathies to those who lost their lives to the storm. I understand that 33 people in the US and 44 in the Caribbean were killed by this powerful storm. Our thoughts and prayers also extend to our neighbors in Florida and in the Conch Republic who are now beginning to return to their homes and are beginning the process of rebuilding. I think we are all looking forward to enjoying that cheeseburger in paradise once again and wish everyone in the Keys well. We are also mindful that many of our immediate neighbors on Tybee Island and Wilmington Island suffered water damage due to the storm surge and wish them well and we offer our support to the City of Tybee Island.

**Recap**

Hurricane Irma first became a Tropical Cyclone on August 30, 2017. As Irma tracked westward, she quickly became one of the most powerful hurricanes ever recorded, reaching maximum sustained winds of 185 miles per hour. Along with the Chatham Emergency Management Agency, the City of Savannah kept a close eye on this storm as it tracked westward. Forecasters had predicted the storm to take a sharp northern turn while in the Caribbean. On Wednesday, September 6, 2017 Governor Nathan Deal ordered a mandatory evacuation for zones A, B and C in Chatham County that would become effective on Saturday, September 9 at 8:00 am. These three zones covered the entirety of Chatham County. At the time of this announcement, Hurricane Irma was forecast to make a direct landfall as a major Category 3 Hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 120 miles per hour. A local state of emergency was declared by Chatham County and curfews imposed.

Evacuation efforts commenced on Friday, September 8th with the evacuation of the Functional Access and Medical Needs population. An Evacuation Assembly Area was established at the Civic Center to coincide with supporting the general population evacuation on Saturday, September 9. Over 1,800 people without the means to evacuate themselves were transported on the first day of operations to two different inland shelter locations, Augusta and Douglas, Georgia. Several hundred more were evacuated on Sunday, September 10. Thankfully, Hurricane Irma tracked farther westward before making a sharp turn to the north. This then caused the governor to amend the original evacuation order, leaving Zone A as a mandatory evacuation, while Zones B and C a general evacuation. We estimate that anywhere between 15 to 20 percent of the City’s population heeded the call to evacuate.

However, due to the sheer size and intensity of Hurricane Irma, we still experienced impacts from the storm. It was predicted that we would receive approximately four to six feet of storm surge, as well as four to eight inches of rain. We began experiencing impacts of the storm on Sunday evening, lasting through Monday afternoon. Sustained tropical storm force winds lasted for hours, with stronger gusts impacting our area. There was approximately 4.7 feet of storm surge measured during the storm (preliminary) with the Fort Pulaski Tide Gauge registering at 12.2 feet, good for second highest ever recorded (Hurricane Matthew was 12.4). This storm surge impacted several residences throughout the County, with many low lying areas receiving flooding. According to CEMA, as of Wednesday evening on September 13, there are three destroyed homes, 197 with major damage, 259 with minor damage, 440 affected habitable and 47,550 that have been assessed with no visible damage County-wide. Damage Assessments are on-going to determine the potential for receiving a Presidential Disaster Declaration.

As many as 74,000 residents in Chatham County were without power.

With impacts of Hurricane Irma being relatively isolated, although severe in places, the decision was made to bring the general population back to Chatham County that was transported via the Evacuation Assembly Area. This population returned on Tuesday, September 12. The receiving operation lasted a mere seven hours, while receiving over 2,300 passengers. These passengers were dropped off at the Civic Center, where Chatham Area Transit provided fare-free transportation to assist in the return of the population to their neighborhoods.

The Functional Access and Medical Needs population returned on Wednesday, September 13. Over 200 homes had to be inspected for structural integrity, running water and electricity prior to returning the residents to their homes. A General Population Shelter was established to support those that had lost their homes during the storm. As of Wednesday, September 13 evening, there are 11 residents in the General Population Shelter.

**Preparation**

As it became apparent that the City would be impacted, we implemented the City’s emergency response plan and began the process of securing buildings. We activated the City’s Incident Management Team, established an Incident Command Post, opened Critical Workforce Shelters, and began continuous 24-hour operations. We also coordinated all operations and policy decisions as a member of Chatham County’s Policy Command Group.

**Response**

During the response phase of the storm, Fire Rescue ensured that additional water rescue teams were operational in the event they were needed. SCMPD patrolled our streets. Public Works staff was on the street and working in critical facilities even though the winds and rain made it difficult to do so.

**Recovery**

Public Works, Fire Rescue, Code Compliance and Development Services led the City’s efforts to conduct damage assessments. Yesterday an army of City staff deployed throughout the City to repair damage and begin the clean-up process. Our Sanitation crews have started the process of removing debris generated by the storm. There were no issues related to our water and sewer utilities, no disruption in public safety services and as you can see clean-up operations are well underway.

**Conclusion**

We are very fortunate to once again escape the wrath of a strong tropical cyclone. Irma allowed us to test our facility as the City’s Command Post. Our investment in that facility paid off and it performed without any issue. We worked very closely with CEMA and all municipalities to ensure there was one common message to all Chatham residents. Public safety incidents were few. Evacuation operations were vastly improved over last year.

Irma also pointed out that despite our improvements, we still have opportunities to further refine our approach to these types of emergencies. We identified opportunities to improve upon our ability to communicate as an organization. Network connectivity requires attention as disruption in power affected our information systems. While we were successful in establishing several critical workforce shelters throughout the region for public safety personnel, there were some logistical and support challenges we need to address in the future. Going forward, we need to work with CEMA to establish pre-positioned supplies of cots, water and other items to support these critical workforce shelters and evacuees.

Mr. Mayor and Members of Council, once again, the City of Savannah performed exceptionally well in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from Irma. I want to take this moment though to thank each and every one of our critical workforce. While others evacuate, they stay behind to make sure that critical services continue uninterrupted and that our residents and businesses have a safe and functional City to return to. I want to though identify several individuals who exhibited exceptional performance during this event:

* Curtis Wallace
* David Donnelly
* John Sawyer, Heath Lloyd and the entire Public Works Department
* Chief Lumpkin and the SCMPD
* Fire Rescue
* Marty Johnston
* Officer Billy Gray, Veleeta McDonald the Civic Center staff
* Damien Hoffman, Cam Mathis, Damien Hoffman, Harry Campbell, Jim McNew and Cinthia Hamilton