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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Laurens County Issues Statement on FEMA Emergency Declaration Exclusion

Laurens, South Carolina, October 4, 2024: Since the beginning of one of the most catastrophic storms in the history of Laurens County, County staff and personnel have worked around the clock to ensure the safety and security of County residents. First Responders and County staff have consistently been out there lending a hand and doing what needed to be done.

During the eye of the storm, County staff was already hard at work; from administration picking up DSS workers to open emergency shelters, to communicating with our counterparts at South Carolina Emergency Management, to removing debris and feeding and sheltering those in dire need, Laurens County did, and continues to do, what needs to be done to hold the line to keep our county safe.

Once the storm passed, County administration and staff began extensive rescue operations throughout the County. The South Carolina National Guard cut its way out of its armories and homes to join the fight clearing roadways and rescuing our citizens. Senator Danny Verdin and Representative Doug Gilliam joined the County efforts and immediately went to work doing everything within their power to assist the rescue operations. Their assistance has been invaluable and greatly appreciated.

County administration and staff fed first responders, communicated with State and Federal officials, set up Points of Distribution to deliver food and water to citizens, cleared roadways and canvassed the entire County so that all citizens were accounted for. County administration and staff worked tirelessly to assist our local utility providers in restoring power and other vital utilities.

While County administration, officials staff and personnel have done everything in their power to assist our citizens, inaction of the part of State and Federal authorities have made our rescue efforts much more difficult. Laurens County was left off an important declaration for FEMA assistance, which would have been a vital lifeline to our residents from the onset.

It is still unknown to County administration why Laurens was left off the declaration and how other counties got on the list to receive necessary assistance. State officials assured Laurens County that the exclusion from the declaration was due to inadvertence as State officials rushed to prepare the declaration. A transcript and recording of a conversation between Laurens County Administrator, Thomas R. Higgs, II and SCEMD Director Kim Stenson is included with this release. County officials were assured the oversight would be corrected, but the heavy lifting was left to the County and its citizens, who were still digging and cutting their way out of their homes. Regardless of blame, there was, and remains, work to be done in order for Laurens County to be treated as equals amongst our sister counties who received far less damage than Laurens County. County staff, and most importantly, County citizens went to work to do the damage assessments needed to qualify for assistance without any help from our Federal or State counterparts. Our citizens took on this task and got the job done when it should not have been their responsibility to do so.



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After these diligent efforts, it was announced that Laurens County had been added to the Emergency Declaration; however, due to inefficient bureaucracy and red tape, Laurens County failed to make the list to receive additional SNAP benefits and has yet to receive additional immediate benefits. Benefits that would replace meals that were lost and put the financial means back into the hands of women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and families who have nothing right now.

As the County investigated why Laurens County continues to be neglected by Federal and State authorities, County officials contacted our liaisons at DSS and were informed that DSS did not have the data from utility companies to show that Laurens County was without power for 50% or more of our population for four hours or more. Anyone with access to the news could see this data is still available and relevant this far into the disaster. The utility companies hold press conferences and release this information to the public daily.

Laurens County reports to South Carolina Emergency Management daily, with the most recent data showing approximately 60% or more still without power. Somehow those reports are just falling on deaf ears, or they simply do not matter. DSS has shifted the rhetoric to blame utility companies for not providing that data on a regular basis while they're out there trying to restore power to our citizens. Where does this stop? When does big government actually step in to help people?

Rest assured, your county is working tirelessly to fight for you and the assistance necessary for you to recover from this devastating storm. We will continue to do whatever is necessary so that our citizens get the much-needed resources and help they need and deserve.