

Preparedness versus “Price-Gouging”: Don’t Hold Out for a Hero

As the US Gulf Coast continues to reel under the impact of Hurricane Harvey, the word “hero” finds itself in much, and appropriate, use. From government first responders to Louisiana’s “Cajun Navy” to just plain old friends and neighbors, people are pitching in and helping one another through the worst tropical storm to make landfall in the US in more than a decade. That’s a ray of sunshine for a cloudy week.

But, living as I do in another hurricane-prone area (Florida) where I got a small taste of the phenomenon from Hermine last year, and having seen my share of tornadoes, blizzards, floods, earthquakes, etc. in other places, it seems to me that hoping for such heroics should be the last rather than the first resort.

No, I’m not suggesting that everyone needs to be, or should be, an all-out “prepper.” Maybe you can afford your own generator, maybe you can’t. Maybe you can afford a boat or a four-wheel-drive vehicle with a winch or snow blade to pitch in with, maybe you can’t. You may or may not be inclined to keep ten years’ worth of freeze-dried food in the spare bedroom.

But most people can afford to take some simple measures to prepare for emergencies both predictable and sudden.

First, always keep several days’ worth of bottled drinking water on hand. It goes for a few dollars a case ... until there’s a run on it because of an impending storm or sudden tap water outage.

Secondly, set aside additional jugs or buckets of water, or keep a rain barrel, so you don’t cut into your drinking supply to keep toilets flushing and for personal hygiene.

And food. Don’t forget food: A few days’ worth of meals that don’t require refrigeration and that you either can eat cold or have a way to cook if the power goes out.

Flashlights, radio, power packs for your phones, batteries for all of the above. Make sure you’re not short on any vital medications, in case you can’t reach an open pharmacy. I’m sure you can think of a few other things.

Unlike some libertarians, I’m not going to try to convince you that merchants who charge greatly increased prices during times of emergency are “heroes” as such. On the other hand, it’s neither realistic nor especially moral to expect a business owner to provide the goods you need — risking his or her own wealth or even life to do so — for any less than the market will bear.

There's an old saying: You can't cheat an honest man.

Here's a new one: You can't "price-gouge" a customer who thinks ahead.

Be your own hero, so someone else doesn't have to.