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Close Window

## Storm expert says big one's heading here " sometime

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OCEAN CITY " A national expert on coastal storms Thursday warned city residents to prepare for the next big one " even if it might be decades away.

A hurricane has not hit southern New Jersey directly since 1903. The state has seen just two hurricanes since 1851 when the first records were kept, according to the National Weather Service. The other New Jersey hurricane struck in 1878.

Hurricanes are a way of life along the East Coast, said Steve Lyons, a tropical storm expert with The Weather Channel.

Many never make landfall, but those that do are increasingly causing widespread destruction as America's coastal population swells, he said.

Lyons gave a presentation on coastal storms Thursday at the Intermediate School.

"You and I know if it hits Ocean City, it's going to be bad," he said.

Last year, the Atlantic Ocean saw 28 named storms including six major hurricanes that struck the United States.

"It doesn't matter how many named storms we have. It only takes one to hit your community," he said.

As bad as Hurricanes Wilma, Rita and Katrina were in 2005, Lyons said they could have been much worse.

Wilma avoided the densely populated St. Petersburg, Fla. Rita only skirted the Galveston-Houston area of Texas. And Katrina's force struck worst in Mississippi, although it caused devastating flooding in New Orleans.

Lyons said national hurricane forecasters are expecting 17 named storms this year including five major hurricanes.

He said it is impossible to predict year to year what states might see hurricanes. The best modeling last year suggested the Atlantic Coast would see the most storms. Instead, the Gulf Coast was battered, he said.

Lyons said the best that residents can do is prepare for storms by fitting their homes with storm shutters, reinforcing garage and patio doors and evacuating quickly when the need arises.

Hurricane Wilma escalated from a tropical storm to a Category-5 hurricane in 21 hours, he said.

The city's Office of Emergency Management invited Lyons to speak Thursday as part of its 2006 Emergency Preparedness Symposium.

As if to reinforce this message of preparedness, Paul Anselm of the city's Historical Society put on a slide show in the back of the room. The old photos captured the devastation caused in Ocean City by coastal storms as recent as 1992. One photograph of a 1991 storm showed a 5-foot-tall wall of water crashing over a Boardwalk pavilion.

Other storms in 1962, 1944 and 1914 turned homes into shambles and flooded the island from the ocean to the bay.

"It happened," Anselm said. "And it will happen again."

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