

## As parts of Florida went dark from Helene and Milton, the lights stayed on in this net-zero, storm-proof community

Rachel Ramirez, CNN

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William Fulford moved from Virginia Beach, Virginia, to a new waterfront development in Florida in 2023. Nestled between Sarasota Bay and the southwestern part of Tampa Bay, the new home by Bradenton Beach was everything Fulford, a retired custom homebuilder, ever wished for.

The developers of the new Hunters Point community, Pearl Homes, billed the property as the [first “net-zero” single-family home](#) development in the US, meaning residents produce more energy from solar panels than they need, with the excess energy either being stored or sold back to the grid – in a state where most electricity is generated by burning natural gas, a planet-warming fossil fuel.

They also boast some of the most sustainable, energy-efficient and hurricane-proof homes in the country: The streets surrounding the homes are intentionally designed to flood so houses don’t. Power and internet lines are buried to avoid wind damage. The sturdy concrete walls, hurricane-proof windows and doors are fortified with a layer of foam insulation, providing extra safety against the most violent storms.

Climate resiliency and storm protection were built into the fabric of the homes. And while the newly developed homes have endured a few storms since people moved in around February 2023, [Hurricanes Helene](#) and [Milton](#) put those features to the true test over the last two weeks.

Most of the residents living in Hunters Point heeded the mandatory evacuations ahead of Hurricane Milton’s landfall but Fulford, 76, stayed behind with wife, Sueann, just as they did during Hurricane Helene last month.

They stocked up on water and groceries. Fulford moved the car to higher ground. He tied up all patio and back deck furniture together. They brought everything from the garage, which made up the entire ground floor, up to the living spaces on the second floor. And, in the event of a worst-case scenario, Sueann insisted on getting life preservers.

“I’m just quite convinced that the strength and everything in this house. They built a great house, a strong house,” Fulford said. “And I just feel comfortable. I feel like we’re high enough up, even if we get a storm surge.”

Hurricane Milton made landfall Wednesday night in Siesta Key, about a 30-minute drive south of Hunters Point. The [storm obliterated](#) vast parts of Florida, including the surrounding areas of Hunters Point like Anna Maria Island and Bradenton. The storm

dumped more than 18 inches of rain on St. Petersburg, which represents a more than 1-in-1000-year rainfall event for the area.



Mobile homes damaged by Hurricane Milton, at Pines Trailer Park in Bradenton Beach on Anna Maria Island, Florida, are seen on October 10, 2024. - Rebecca Blackwell/AP



Toppled palm trees lie alongside a road in Bradenton Beach on Anna Maria Island, Florida, on October 10, 2024. - Rebecca Blackwell/AP

Milton knocked out power for more than 2.5 million customers across the state, including in Manatee County, where Hunters Point homes are located.

But for Fulford and his neighbors, the lights stayed on.

“Everybody around us was completely dark at like five in the morning, and you see the lights on in our houses,” Marshall Gobuty, the founder and president of the Pearl Homes development, told CNN. “So, it really was a test of why we did this.”

Residents who stayed through both hurricanes told CNN they suffered little to no damage. Neither the heavy surge flooding from Helene nor the strong winds from Milton devastated their homes. Solar power and battery storage kept the lights on all night and the following days.

“I hope people take a hard look at all of this and start paying attention to what goes on here,” Fulford said. “Everything is changing,” referring to the stronger storms he’s now seeing each year.

### **Storm-proof success**



Construction workers are seen securely attaching solar panels to the roofs' raised vertical seams to prevent them from flying off during violent storms in April 2024. - Julian Quinones/CNN/File

When Gobuty started the design process for Hunters Point, it was imperative the homes be able to withstand Category 5 hurricanes. It's the first residential development to get a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) net-zero certification in the world, according to the US Green Building Council.

Each of the three-story homes are designed like this: The ground floor is a garage designed with flood vents to drain rising water. The living spaces start on the second floor, which is intentionally built 16 feet above sea level. From the roof to its foundation, steel straps secure the entire structure. Solar panels are attached to the roofs' raised vertical seams to prevent them from flying off.

The property also sits in a major flood zone, which meant the homes needed to be elevated to meet Florida's building codes. Still, the developers went beyond the required 3 feet of fill dirt and used 7 feet instead to be safe.

"The idea is that if water did come into the garage, which is fine, because we have the flood beds which are specifically there for that, there's still 9 feet of garage," Gobuty said. "That would have to be an impossibility (for the floods to enter). We knew that it would never happen."



Construction workers are seen securely attaching solar panels to the roofs' raised vertical seams to prevent them from flying off during violent storms in April 2024. - Julian Quinones/CNN/File

But these features come at a cost. According to [the community's website](#), the homes are selling for \$1.4 million to \$1.9 million, compared to other new homes in the area priced for at least \$600,000.

As a custom builder who built hurricane-proof homes himself in Virginia, Fulford said he is impressed by how his new Florida home has been built. So far, the project is still under construction, with 31 homes complete of the 86 to be developed.

Luckily, Hurricane Milton's landfall location, south of Tampa Bay, spared the area from the worst-case scenario forecasts of up to 15 feet of storm surge. Instead, Milton drove the worst storm surge across a 65-mile stretch of coast between Siesta Key and Fort Myers Beach.

But in a climate change-ravaged future, Hunters Point residents say they need to prepare for what's to come, underscoring more homes need to be built and designed this way.

"Solar, batteries and the way we construct homes will be part of the future, because we see it's performing," Gobuty said. "The world is changing, and this is the test people are waiting to see."

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