

Restoring normalcy after storms depends on businesses reopening

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TALLAHASSEE — It's a couple of days after a hurricane and most of the danger has passed. Now the fight is against discomfort and misery.

There's no electricity yet, which means no hot meals, no gasoline, no cash from the ATM. And it's a day without air conditioning in the stifling Florida summer. Cell phone batteries are dying — and it's hard to get a signal anyway.

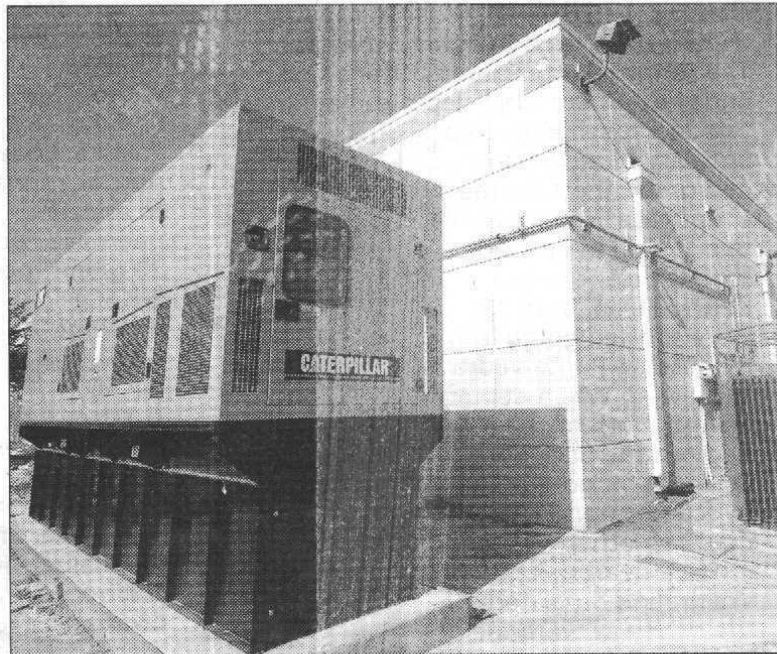
One thing fixes most of the misery: electricity. Even if your house doesn't have power, it helps when there's electricity somewhere — maybe a nearby restaurant, or a store with cold bottled water, maybe even a bar with cold beer.

For all that government does to help people and get the basics done after a storm — performing rescues, clearing roads, fixing red lights — it's only when the businesses get going again that life begins to seem normal.

"You might not have your air, but you can go out and drive somewhere and get something to eat with the kids because they're going nuts," said Richard Walker, a West Palm Beach businessman who has been thinking a lot in the last couple of years about the power outages caused by hurricanes. "People have got to get food and people have got to get fuel."

After seeing the inconvenience faced by his community after two years of hurricanes, Walker started Power To Go, a company that provides mobile generators for businesses, primarily restaurants and gas stations.

"In 2004, we sold over 460 generators," Walker said. "In 2005, we sold over a thousand." This year he'll exceed



A back-up generator sits behind a Publix supermarket Friday in Royal Palm Beach. Publix is trying to have about 400 generators at its stores this year. **By STEVE MITCHELL,** The Associated Press

that by the middle of hurricane season.

Hurricanes can wreak havoc on Florida's electric system. While many new power lines are underground, older ones are still strung above ground and falling trees can bring them down. For example, Hurricane Wilma last October knocked out electricity to more than 6 million people across South Florida. Many were without power for more than two weeks.

The power companies say they're better prepared than ever to deal with hurricanes and moving to make their infrastructure more sturdy, hoping to do their part to get things back on after a storm.

But many businesses won't be waiting for the utilities. Stung by being without power for more than two weeks after last year's Hurricane Wilma, many are going to businesses like Walker's to make sure

they can get back up and running quickly.

Jim Smith, president of Florida Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association, which represents mostly small gas stations, said his membership — about 60 percent of those in Florida — is now about 20 percent generator capable, meaning they could easily switch to generator power.

And generator power is becoming the norm at big retailers that have the items people need after a storm.

Publix, for example, has a goal of having generators at about 400 of its stores this year.

Home Depot — where people may go for repair supplies as soon as the winds die down — has long had generators in all its Florida stores, said company vice president Bob Puzon.

"As long as we have 10 associates in the store we can open immediately," Puzon said.