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NORTHWEST FLORIDA

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A man rides a motorcycle on the beach after the passage of Hurricane Erin, the first hurricane of the 2025 Atlantic season, on Aug. 17 in Nagua, Dominican Republic. ERIKA SANTELICES/REUTERS

Erin strengthens into Category 4 hurricane

Likely to remain major storm through midweek

Christopher Cann
USA TODAY

Hurricane Erin intensified once more Aug. 18 and was expected to strengthen further as it threatened the Bahamas and Hispaniola and was forecast to bring “life-threatening” surf conditions to the eastern U.S. coast this week.

After losing some power over the weekend, the hurricane strengthened back into a Category 4 storm with maxi-

mum sustained winds of 140 mph, according to an 11 a.m. ET advisory from the National Hurricane Center.

Erin, the first hurricane to form this Atlantic season, is huge and expected to grow larger. As of the morning of Aug. 18, its wind field was some 397 miles in diameter. It was creating high seas across an area roughly 500 miles in diameter.

Erin ranks around the 80th percentile in terms of storm sizes of major hurricanes in the past couple of decades, John Cangialosi wrote in the hurricane center’s 5 a.m ET discussion.

A tropical storm warning was in place Aug. 18 for the Turks and Caicos Islands

as well as parts of the Bahamas. The islands were at risk of “flash and urban flooding,” according to the hurricane center.

Forecasters showed the storm intensifying more as it gradually turns north on a path that will send it between the United States and Bermuda over the coming days.

The storm was expected to steer clear of the U.S. coast, though forecasters warned it could bring dangerous surf and rip currents to the entire Eastern Seaboard.

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Jury returns verdict in 2021 murder

Northwest Florida Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Walton County jury has returned guilty verdicts against a man accused of fatally shooting another man in August 2021, according to a news release from the 1st Judicial Circuit State Attorney’s Office.

Sentencing for Shawn Richard Bennett has been set for Oct. 7. The jury found him guilty of first-degree murder and robbery while armed with a firearm.

The victim, whose name was not included in the news release, was shot and killed on Aug. 12, 2021. According to prosecutors, the man traveled from Fort Walton Beach to a home in Mossy Head intending to buy pain pills but instead was shot by Bennett.

The news release says Bennett and a co-defendant, Thomas Pride, had planned to rob the victim that day. Prosecutors say they took the victim’s body to Crestview, where a third person was paid to bury it in a shallow grave. That grave was on Chapperal Street east of Crestview, according to a previous Daily News account.

According to the prosecutor’s office, investigators later found Bennett to be in possession of the victim’s firearm and other belongings.

Pride is serving a 30-year prison term “for setting up the robbery and his participation in the murder,” the news release says.

“The investigation and arrest were conducted by the Walton County Sheriff’s Office with assistance from Okaloosa County Sheriff’s Office and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement,” the release adds.

Help spruce up Fort Walton Beach on Aug. 23

City council priorities include fixing median irrigation systems

Frank Stanfield
Special to Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Fort Walton Beach residents hoping to help their city be named the Cleanest City on the Emerald Coast can grab a trash bag on Aug. 23 and pitch in to pitch out litter and other debris.

City council has made beautification one of its priorities, said City Manager Jason Davis, and work is already underway.

“You have spoken and we have heard,” the city announced online.

One example: City council approved a \$12,000 contract to fix the irrigation

system in medians on U.S. 98. “Some of the pumps don’t work,” Davis said.

“The parks could use some love, too,” he said.

One of the problems is perception. Motorists might drive by signs that indicate they are in the city, but they could be on county, U.S. or state roads. Davis says he is reaching out to those governments to coordinate efforts.

The city has its challenges. It is bordered by the Gulf and Eglin Air Force Base, “which is massive,” Davis said,

and Hurlburt Field. The population is 22,000 and has remained so for 30 years.

Big or small, quality matters, city officials say.

The roadside cleanup project will be held Aug. 23 from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. from sidewalks along Hollywood Boulevard from Chester Pruitt Park west to Memorial Parkway. The cleanup will begin at the park.

A bigger, more sensitive issue is identifying homeless encampments with

their trash and unsanitary conditions.

“The vagrancy situation is unfortunate. Some need help with substance abuse or mental health,” Davis said. One of the goals is to put them in touch with community resources to help them.

The Rotary Club and Keep Okaloosa Beautiful have agreed to partner with the city. A group from Texas is coming for a future paint day to get rid of graffiti.

“Fortunately we don’t have much of that,” Davis said.

A church group has also promised to help.

Future initiatives include a passenger car pickup day, adopt-a-road, furniture collection by city workers and others.

Davis said volunteers can call him, or they can go to city websites.

Businesses and organizations will receive recognition on those websites, city officials say.

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