

May 26, 2009

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hard lessons learned from Hurricane Ike

FORT MYERS, FL – Long before hurricane-force winds hit the shore, Galveston County began suffering the impacts of a devastating hurricane named Ike.

“About 24 hours before the storm hit, the roads on the Bolivar Peninsula became impassable due to quickly rising tides,” said John Lee Jr., mitigation coordinator for the Galveston County Office of Emergency Management. “If you went to bed Thursday night thinking you’d evacuate early Friday morning, you woke up to a very big surprise.” Even though Galveston County issued a mandatory evacuation order on Wednesday, some of the 5,000 year-round residents didn’t leave.

Hurricane Ike made landfall on the east end of Galveston Island at 2:10 a.m. on Saturday, Sept. 13, 2008, with winds in excess of 100 mph and a storm surge measured at 17-20 feet. The storm severely damaged or completely destroyed approximately 75 percent of the 6,000 structures on the Bolivar Peninsula, east of Galveston Island, across the mouth of Galveston Bay, and in the dangerous upper-right quadrant of the landfalling storm.

In the months since Ike struck, the county’s cooperative emergency management group has learned a thing or two they might do differently next time – preferring, of course, that there won’t be a next time.

“One thing we learned that we did right was secure pre-staged contracts for supplies and debris removal,” Lee said. “Had we not done that, our recovery and rescue efforts would have been severely delayed.”

The group also observed that wider beaches do protect upland structures. Lee explained that the beaches on the western end of the Bolivar Peninsula are wider than other island beaches due to their proximity to a jetty. He said, “Even though this area was at ground zero, where the eye of Hurricane Ike made landfall, the homes directly behind those wider beaches were much less damaged than the other areas of the peninsula, where the beaches are narrower.”

Lee says they also learned they needed to tweak their hurricane evacuation plan, which calls for a mandatory evacuation if the county is being approached by a Category 3 storm or greater. “Ike was not a Category 3 storm – it was just under at 110 mph,” he explained. “The problem was the huge swells and storm surge being pushed ashore in advance of the storm. Had we known the surge was going to be closer to a strong Category 3 or 4, I believe more people would have left.”

Galveston County officials also learned they needed to be able to sustain themselves for 5-7 days and longer after a storm while FEMA and other resources were mobilized to the area.

Another lesson learned was that new building codes work. "Structures built with the new construction codes for piling depth, window strength and strapping held up, while older structures failed," Lee explained.

Finally, Lee says the Emergency Management team has learned the value of sticking to a recovery plan once it is in place. "We experienced some miscommunications and people not working the plan, which hampered our overall efforts, but we've learned the importance of working together to stick to our plan."

Galveston County is still in the thick of its recovery; many people have been working seven days a week since the storm. The county's Long Term Recovery Committee has recently started implementation of the "Bolivar Blueprint," an interactive planning process between officials, citizens, business and a broad cross-section of community representatives. The ultimate goal is for the recovery plan to serve as a roadmap to rebuilding a better community.

"There is a long road ahead," Lee said. "But we are moving forward together."

For more information, please visit www.asbpa.org.

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