

HURRICANE: Season begins

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which could be used to provide up-to-date alerts.

"This will be good because, if we have evacuees driving through Fort Bend County, we'll be able to inform them if there's a detour or other critical issues," he said.

The station, said Braun, is currently playing weather updates from the National Weather Service, but is "90 percent of the way" to becoming fully functional.

The Fort Bend County Health and Human Services Department, said Braun, is implementing what is called the Special Needs Awareness Program, or SNAP. Braun said the program is aimed at helping individuals who may have difficulties taking part in an evacuation.

Two new programs are in place to train Fort Bend County residents to volunteer in the event of an emergency, said Braun.

The Citizens Support Team (CST) provides training for volunteers to help county officials at the Emergency Operations Center, which is the hub of emergency management for Fort Bend County. There, county employees from various departments work 12-hour shifts in an emergency, said Braun, and residents who complete the CST course will be able to volunteer at the center.

"So, it's a way for us to be efficient with our limited resources by using volunteers willing to help us out," he said.

The second new volunteer group is county citizens who

undergo Community Emergency Response Training (CERT). This group, said Braun, will receive more generalized training to provide a response to an emergency situation anywhere in the county.

"They're trained to basically provide basic, first-response before fire and EMS arrive on the scene," he said.

Two CERT classes are under way, said Braun, in Sugar Land and Richmond. Altogether, 63 people are taking the program.

Braun said the Emergency Management Office will continue using the volunteer services of amateur HAM radio enthusiasts, whose skills could be vital in the event a natural disaster renders phone lines unusable.

As always, Braun stressed the importance of residents making plans for the event of a hurricane, including communications with relatives and making a disaster supply kit with food and water.

"No matter what we do here at emergency management, unless citizens take it upon themselves to take actions to prepare their own family, a lot of this is not going to be successful," he said.

Also, the events of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina taught emergency officials the importance of people including their pets in evacuation plans. Braun said families should bring photos of their pets and otherwise be able to identify them.

"You want all that written down in case you need to go to a center where you will be separated from your pet," he said.

Danny Jan and Jeff Braun are shown in the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management's emergency center in Richmond.

STAFF PHOTO BY RUSSELL AUTREY



The 2007 hurricane season has arrived

County authorities are prepared

BY STEPHEN PALKOT

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A series of new initiatives by the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management is being implemented in time for this year's hurricane season, which is predicted to have above-normal activity.

The National Weather Service predicts 13 to 17 named storms and that seven to 10 hurricanes will form in the Gulf of Mexico this year.

Fort Bend County Emergency Coordinator Jeff Braun said his office has been using lessons from the past to prepare for this hurricane season.

"A lot of what we do now is based on what happened in 2005 with hurricanes Rita and Katrina," said Braun.

Since 2005, the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management and the state of Texas have implemented several changes to hurricane planning and evacuation plans.

In 2005, Fort Bend County's freeways came to a near-halt for hours on end as Gulf Coast resi-

dents fled inland, causing gasoline shortages and a myriad of problems for those on the road.

Braun said the state of Texas now has plans in place to more quickly open freeways to contra-flow traffic, converting all freeway lanes to run a single direction.

In particular, said Braun, all lanes on I-10 would be converted to run westbound in the event of a coastal evacuation, and that freeway would pick up much of the inland traffic from Highway 36.

"We think that's going to be a real benefit to our people in Fort Bend County," he said.

Also, an AM radio system is in the final stages of construction and is scheduled to be ready for the hurricane season, said Braun.

Using radio towers throughout Fort Bend County, the Office of Emergency Management this year will be able to broadcast emergency-related messages over 1630 AM. Braun said highway signs will inform motorists of the station.

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