

County reviews how it handled Hurricane Rita

By Stephen Palkot

Everything from having more thumbtacks to improving communications has been suggested by county employees in the wake of Hurricane Rita, say Fort Bend County officials.

From Sept. 21 to Sept. 25, the county enacted its emergency operations center, which is based out of the Emergency Management office in Richmond. There, a group of more than 100 county employees from various departments coordi-

nated a 24-hour-a-day response to challenges that arose from the storm.

A meeting last week found about 75 county employees offering their input into aspects of the county's response that need to be improved, and Emergency Management Coordinator Jeff Braun has been directed to develop an after-action report outlining on the county's performance during Rita.

Hurricane Rita veered farther east than original landfall projections, and the county experienced

minimal damage to property and a minimal loss of lives.

However, the evacuation of residents from Houston and Gulf Coast counties created a traffic bottleneck that proved a emergency in itself, said County Judge Bob Hebert, where travelers were stranded with limited resources and low on gas.

Also, much of the high-tech equipment in the Emergency Management office was recently acquired, making the activities surrounding Rita the first chance to

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test it.

On the plus side, county employees showed a good attitude, made sacrifices and displayed good teamwork, said Braun. Plus, a drill in May of 2004 taught the

county many lessons, and contributed to an improved coordination between many entities.

However, employees offered many suggestions for improvement, said Braun, some of which are simple and can be implemented immediately, and others that may require purchasing equipment or other lengthy processes.

Lodging and feeding county employees had not been fully prepared, said Braun.

"We need to come up with some plans for something more formalized if we had a longer term situation like we had in East Texas or Louisiana," he said.

Plus, employees had a number of questions from the use of the office's technology, including a desire for better integration on the Internet.

The building for the county's Emergency Management office is a decades-old, renovated jail, creating several other problems, said Braun. Among them was a need to improve air-conditioning, as many employees stayed there for long periods.

Hebert said he had suggestions both large and small.

"It could be as simple as a sign in the kitchen to make sure the vent hood is working before the stove is turned on," he said.

On a larger scale, Hebert said the county needs to streamline the process for providing information to the phone bank workers, who answer questions for residents. Perhaps the installation of a printer in the phone bank, or even an information screen, could keep those taking calls apprised of the most recent information, said Hebert.

"I'm pleased with what we did, but I don't think you can accomplish anything by standing around and patting yourself on the back," said Hebert.

Braun said he will next be meeting with officials from cities and other jurisdictions that participated in Fort Bend County's response.

The report he prepares will be submitted to Hebert, who will then present it to the commissioners court.