

Emergency management has seen great strides in 2004

By Cheryl Skinner

In looking over the past year, Fort Bend County Emergency Management Coordinator Jeff Braun sees dozens of accomplishments made by the office that has been in existence for years but has emerged from the 911 tragedy as one of the fast-

est growing and busiest divisions of county government.

When asked to provide a brief synopsis of accomplishments for 2004 and goals for 2005, Braun responded in the same fashion he has on emergency management since being appointed to the position - with gusto. Braun said there are several other

major initiatives completed in 2004, including the formation of Regional Haz Mat Response Teams, the signing of an interjurisdictional mutual aid agreement with all county jurisdictions, the formation of a "Coordinators" group which meets on a monthly basis to discuss emergency management, obtaining additional emergency response equipment through use of Homeland Security grants, and other significant changes or additions that have been accomplished the past year.

Braun said he hoped to see the county completing more additional training, exercise and preparedness activities and projects in 2005, "namely the completion of a Mitigation Action Plan ("Hazard Analysis") for the entire county; implementation of a Regional Automated Fingerprint Identification System (in cooperation with Harris County); continued support and enhancement of emergency response projects related to haz mat response and interoperable communications; updating and renovating the County's Emergency Operations Center; and the formation of new initiatives with the Bio-terrorism task force."

"As you can see, the Office of Emergency Management is moving aggressively to protect the county from threats. It is important to note that OEM works on an all-hazards approach, meaning we are working on projects designed to protect the county from all types of hazards (e.g. chemical spills, hurricanes, river flooding), not just terrorism hazards. Clearly, much federal money has been made available to local governments to increase the capacity to combat unseen terroristic threats. However, it is imperative that investments in emergency management deliver a tangible benefit on a daily basis not just some potential benefit

in the relatively unlikely event of an attack on Fort Bend County," Braun said.

"Through the leadership of Judge Robert Hebert, the emergency management director of the county, the OEM activities are undertaken with the goal of enhancing security in the long-term, while simultaneously delivering benefit to daily operations. It is hoped that the efforts of the Office of Emergency Management will instill confidence in citizens to lead their normal lives without fear from those who wish to harm us, or from those natural disasters that might occur in Fort Bend County," Braun noted.

Some of the major accomplishments in 2004, include: an update of the county's basic emergency plan with Danny Jan, Assistant Emergency Management Coordinator, spearheaded this updating effort.

The EOM also updated the evacuation plan in the county. Because of hurricane threats, Fort Bend County must be prepared to respond to a large-scale evacuation of Galveston and Brazoria counties. In the Spring of 2004, the Office of Emergency Management and the Texas Department of Public Safety coordinated discussions with law enforcement agencies in Fort Bend County to discuss evacuation plans and traffic control issues. As a result of these meetings, an updated Evacuation Plan was completed in June 2004. It is anticipated that the Evacuation Plan will be reviewed and updated annually, Braun said.

The county also hosted a county-wide terrorism incident preparedness exercise in 2004. Over 250 individuals participated in the two and a half day exercise in early May 2004. Participants in the exercise included emergency response staff from Fort Bend County, the cities of Sugar Land, Missouri City, Rosenberg, Stafford, and Richmond, American Red Cross, and local school districts. With the "standing up" of seven Emergency Operations Centers, this exercise program was one of the most complex and well-attended programs ever sponsored by GDEM. The primary training focus of the functional exercise was consequence management ("managing the effects of the incident").

Braun said the 2005 year will be no less intense with three major projects for 2005 on the drawing board. They include: A debris management plan and completion of a county-wide debris management plan. Fort Bend County commissioners recently approved consultant, Dewberry & Davis, to assist in this project. Braun said his office is also undertaking an effort to build a more formal aid coordinated volunteer program. The purpose of this effort is to more fully develop those county employees ("Core Team") who are assigned to the EOC during an emergency, as well as develop a group of citizens who will support OEM/EOC opera-

tions as needed. Development of the volunteer program will focus on recruitment activities, training activities, coordination activities, and also plans for maintaining volunteer interest levels. The goal is to have this comprehensive volunteer program in operation by the end of June 2005.

Danny Jan is taking the lead on this project, with significant assistance also being provided by Kristy Mosolino, OEM Planning Coordinator.

During 2005, the OEM will be also be developing emergency operation plans for each county department. Overall, Braun said, this plan will increase safety for employees, improve emergency response, and lessen risk.