

Plan for disaster funds still is lacking

By Joe Compian and Barbara Crews | Posted: Sunday, February 7, 2010 11:00 pm

This week the Texas Department of Rural Affairs will resubmit its plan for spending \$3 billion in federal disaster funding to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

HUD rejected the first draft of this plan in November because of numerous problems which we and others vigorously pointed out to TDRA and HUD at several public hearings.

We are pleased to say the current TDRA plan is considerably better than the previous version with one glaring exception: The state continues to embrace a funding model that is based on "estimated damages" derived from weather maps rather than on the actual "unmet needs" of communities.

One improvement is that the state makes permanent the 50-50 split between housing and nonhousing funding in each region. This means about \$1.5 billion statewide must be used to help people elevate rehabilitate and even totally rebuild their storm-damaged homes.

Our local elected officials wisely agreed with our proposal that an even greater amount 60 percent of all federal funds be dedicated to housing restoration. About \$486 million in Galveston and Galveston County would be used for housing restoration.

If any city or county can't use their funds as allocated then other jurisdictions in that region will have the first shot at using those funds for housing. If no jurisdiction in the region can use the funds for that purpose then those funds will be returned to the state for "reallocation ... to regions that have the greatest level of unmet needs."

The ongoing outreach efforts of the city and county social service organizations and all the great volunteers who are walking door to door to encourage people to sign up are critical. We either use the funding for housing or lose that funding to areas that are better able to encourage families to sign up and able to help them qualify for assistance.

The big upside for our community is that if we document our tremendous "unmet need" we have the opportunity to gain substantial funding from communities to which the state has allocated hundreds of millions but that suffered relatively little damage.

According to HUD Galveston County has more than \$820 million in housing "unmet need" and \$260 million is needed for economic development to help small businesses recover.

This unmet need of more than \$1 billion for housing and economic development in Galveston County makes it all the more inexplicable that the state of Texas would persist in using "estimated damages" based on the weather to grant more than \$104 million to a pool of inland counties has less than one-

half of 1 percent of the unmet need or more than \$240 million to Deep East Texas which has only 2.3 percent of the unmet need.

TDRA seems to be entirely deaf to analysis and arguments offered by ourselves many elected officials and residents in this region.

One can only wonder why.

We must continue to urge HUD push the state of Texas to distribute these funds based on the need not the weather.

Joe Compian is a member of Gulf Coast Interfaith and Barbara Crews is a member of Galveston County Restore and Rebuild.