

County approves state recovery plan

Officials, advocates slam hurricane recovery formula

By Mike Snyder | August 24, 2009

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State officials used a flawed formula that resulted in serious inequities in their proposed allocation of \$1.7 billion in federal hurricane recovery funds, according to housing advocates and public officials who have analyzed the plan.

Harris County commissioners earlier today approved a resolution opposing the draft plan by the state's **Office of Rural Community Affairs**.

The document proposes allocations based on wind speeds, rainfall, storm surge and the impact of the hurricane eye wall, but without accounting for population density, vulnerable housing or other conditions in the affected areas.

If applied at the county level, the formula would result in a "damage factor" for Kenedy County in South Texas — population 388, according to the **Census Bureau** — almost as high as the factor for Fort Bend County, with more than 530,000 residents.

"You wonder what they were smoking when people put this together," Commissioner **Sylvia Garcia** said Monday.

Groups want changes

County officials, the **Houston-Galveston Area Council** staff and board and leaders of nonprofit groups that have studied the plan said ORCA's approach, which one group dubbed the "weather report model," should be revised.

"Weather is not a good proxy for damage," said **Madison Sloan**, a staff attorney with Texas Appleseed, a nonprofit law center that has assisted hurricane victims. "You could have severe winds and rain in the middle of the ocean."

ORCA officials acknowledged that the plan wasn't ideal. They said, however, that damage assessments were so inconsistent and the factors affecting recovery so complex that they decided to rely on the best data available about the potential impact of Hurricanes Ike and Dolly.

In part, the new proposal reflects an effort to compensate for problems with the first round of funding — \$1.3 billion parceled out to affected communities last year, said **Cecil Pennington**, manager of planning and development for ORCA's disaster recovery division. That plan drew criticism as well.

"We were trying to get that balance of factors," Pennington said.

Criticism from Emmett

Harris County Judge **Ed Emmett** suggested that Gov. **Rick Perry** erred in designating ORCA as the lead agency for planning the use of the hurricane recovery funds.

Emmett noted that the money comes from the **Department of Housing and Urban Development**. Choosing a department with a rural focus to administer funds provided by an agency with the word "urban" in its name seems illogical, Emmett said.

The city of Houston has raised no objections to the draft plan, which sets aside \$174 million for a state-administered affordable rental housing program to comply with a HUD requirement.

One of few bright spots

Houston is using most of its hurricane recovery money to rehabilitate run-down apartment developments, and the city is confident of faring well because it has a number of qualified projects ready to start work, said **Richard Celli**, director of housing and community development.

Sloan and other nonprofit leaders said the money for rental housing repairs was one of the few bright spots in ORCA's plan.

Gulf Coast Interfaith, a coalition of community groups, analyzed the plan using **Federal Emergency Management Agency** damage estimates from Hurricane Ike. The analysis assumes that each county will use half of its money for housing, as ORCA recommends.

Funding varies widely

The analysis showed that the amount of funding per severely damaged home varied widely among the regional councils of governments that receive allocations from ORCA, from a low of \$27,111 per home in the Houston-Galveston Area Council to a high of \$237,047 per home in the **Deep East Texas Council of Governments**.

While allocations within each region will be determined by the council of government boards, the disparities illustrate the problems with the approach ORCA used, said **Joe Higgs**, an organizer with Gulf Coast Interfaith.

Commissioner Garcia, meanwhile, said Harris County still is waiting for its share of money from the first round of funding. Because of state delays, the county probably won't be able to begin providing repair funds to qualified homeowners for another month, she said.

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