

Houston-area panel OKs new plan for Ike aid allocation

Panel OKs new plan to allocate federal Ike aid

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Houston-area elected officials approved a plan for allocating \$814 million in federal Hurricane Ike recovery funds Tuesday, but officials said it's likely to be several months before work can begin on housing or infrastructure projects.

The **Houston-Galveston Area Council**'s board of directors, with two dissenting votes, approved a staff-submitted plan with major changes from the original Feb. 6 proposal. The combined allocations to Galveston and Galveston County now account for 53 percent of the funds, and the revisions reduce the allocation to Houston while increasing funding for Harris County's small cities and unincorporated areas.

Intense objections

Throughout the 13-county H-GAC area, the plan calls for spending 56 percent of the money on housing and the rest on infrastructure or economic development projects.

Although the federal **Community Development Block Grant** funds generally are intended to benefit poor and working-class families, state officials said they expect to receive waivers that would allow the money to assist a family of four earning up to about \$60,000 a year.

Tuesday's vote followed intense objections by Harris County officials, who initially were to receive only about half as much money as Houston. County Judge **Ed Emmett** and Commissioner **Sylvia Garcia** said this was insufficient to assist families in Galveston Bay communities devastated by Ike's storm surge.

"It's never fun to fight about money," Garcia said, encouraging her colleagues to put aside their differences and begin planning for additional federal allocations expected later this year.

'Too darn much money'

But Matagorda County Judge **Nate McDonald** said even the revised state allocation of \$109 million to Houston, down from the originally proposed \$172.3 million, was overly generous.

"That's just too darn much money" for a major city that can draw on local resources unavailable to small rural communities such as those he represents, McDonald said.

Houston officials countered that damage to thousands of homes in the city would only get worse if repairs weren't made soon, and said they were prepared to start work immediately on rental repair projects that could benefit the entire region.

In the end, though, Houston's representatives on the board, Councilwoman **Anne Clutterbuck** and Councilman **James Rodriguez**, voted with the majority. The two no votes were cast by McDonald and Liberty County Commissioner **Todd Fontenot**.

Several board members stressed the importance of spending the federal money as quickly and effectively as possible, noting that this could affect future allocations. State agencies and local government councils such as H-GAC have faced criticism for their slowness in rebuilding East Texas homes damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Rita in 2005.

HUD approval is next

Representatives of the nonprofit Gulf Coast Interfaith urged the board to commence housing repairs as soon as possible, since this would provide hope to uninsured families who haven't received sufficient **Federal Emergency Management Agency** funds to make repairs.

"This is a victory on two counts," said Joe Compian, a leader of the group from Galveston. Galveston and Galveston County, where homes were most severely damaged, will receive 53 percent of the funds and spend 60 percent of their combined allocations on housing, he said.

"This is a big investment in helping our families return," Compian said.

Leaders of the two state agencies charged with administering the federal funds said they hoped to submit the state's plan to the U.S. Department of **Housing and Urban Development** by Thursday. HUD then has 45 days to review and approve the plan, they said, and in the meantime local communities can begin identifying qualified projects and creating systems to accept applications for home repairs.

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