

Galveston asks for more federal relief money

By Leigh Jones | Posted: Wednesday, February 11, 2009 11:00 pm

Few area leaders and officials who spoke during a disaster relief public hearing Wednesday credited the Houston-Galveston Area Council with fairly divvying up \$814 million in federal funds.

Although all 15 applauded the group's decision to recommend 60 percent of funds distributed in Galveston and Galveston County be used to repair damaged houses many criticized its decision to consider houses that sustained less than \$8000 in damage in its allocation formulas.

Including the smaller amounts of damage gave Houston an unfair amount of relief money Galveston City Manager Steve LeBlanc said.

"Although I understand that's a lot (of damage) for some folks it's nothing compared to the total destruction the residents of Galveston have experienced" he said.

Hurricane Ike left a wide swath of damage along the upper Texas coast reaching as far inland as Houston when it made landfall on Sept. 13.

But according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency damage reports the council used to set funding allocations 96 percent of the houses in the city of Houston damaged by Hurricane Ike needed repairs that would cost less than \$8000.

Only 48 percentage of houses in Galveston had such minor damage.

But 6 percent of Galveston houses damaged during the storm need repairs that will cost more than \$28000. Only 0.4 percent of Houston's houses had such extensive damage.

The council has recommended giving Galveston \$179.8 million and giving Houston \$172.3 million.

Galveston deserved more Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas said.

"Ike was an inconvenience in Houston" she said. "For Galveston and Bolivar it was a disaster."

Level Playing Field

Representatives from Harris County Judge Ed Emmett's office joined LeBlanc in asking the area council to reconsider its funding formula.

"Harris County is looking to you to get it right and provide a level playing field" Gabriel Vasquez said.

The council needs to make a genuine effort to change its funding model based on input from the public hearings Vasquez said.

Harris County would only get \$85.8 million under the proposed allocations.

No one from the city of Houston spoke during Wednesday's hearing.

Money On The Streets

The council announced its recommended allocations Friday but the suggestions won't be final until the group votes Tuesday to send the recommendations to the state for approval.

The funds are part of the \$2.1 billion disaster relief package approved by former President George W. Bush late last year. Gov. Rick Perry designated the Texas Office of Rural and Community Affairs to divide up Texas' \$1.3 billion share of which \$814 million went to the 12-county area served by the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

Only Galveston County Judge Jim Yarbrough and representatives from cities in the county hit hard by Ike said they were pleased with the proposed allocations.

Yarbrough promised to make sure any money the county gets is spent wisely and quickly.