

Plan to divide Ike aid across region leaves few happy

Plan for \$814 million in Ike recovery aid questioned

Some hard-hit Harris communities' share is much less than Houston's and Galveston's

MIKE SNYDER

, Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle | February 9, 2009

Comments 32 | E-mail | Print

Recommend 0

Tweet 0

0



Photo By James Nielsen/Chronicle

This home knocked into a canal by Hurricane Ike remained there last week in San Leon. Photo: James Nielsen, Chronicle

Houston would receive almost as much Hurricane Ike recovery money as Galveston, while other hard-hit Harris County communities would receive far less, under a preliminary plan for using \$814 million in federal funds to rebuild homes and infrastructure.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council's proposed plan would provide roughly \$180 million to Galveston, \$237 million to the rest of Galveston County, \$172 million to Houston and \$86 million to the rest of Harris County.

The remainder would be awarded to other counties in the region through a competitive process.

Harris County and Houston officials on Monday each said the H-GAC should use different data to determine allocations, and each said their jurisdictions should get more. Their comments could be the opening round in a protracted political struggle shadowed by the memories of long delays in spending federal recovery funds provided to Texas after Hurricane Rita in 2005.

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett said the plan short-changes the county's unincorporated areas and small cities such as Shoreacres, where almost 6 out of 10

houses were destroyed or suffered more than 50 percent damage.

Relied on FEMA requests

In determining allocations, Emmett said, H-GAC officials relied too heavily on requests for assistance to the Federal Emergency Management Agency rather than looking at where the most severe damage actually occurred. Hundreds of thousands of people applied for FEMA funds who weren't eligible, he said.

Richard Celli, Houston's director of housing and community development, said enrollments in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Ike housing program are a better gauge of severely damaged housing than FEMA data. Using the HUD figures would result in a greater share for Houston, which is ready to start work on rental housing rehabilitation projects that could benefit the whole area, Celli said.

Chuck Wemple, the H-GAC official who led the development of the plan, said it was based on FEMA damage estimates and its housing assistance payments as well as the percentages of low- and moderate-income people in each community. The federal government allocated \$1.3 billion to Texas for long-term Ike recovery, mainly for poor and working-class families.

"We agree that there's a lot of issues with the FEMA data," Wemple said, "but we have to have a data set that's constant across the region." He said the H-GAC would take into account comments in two public hearings this week before submitting a plan to its board.

HUD must give OK

HUD must approve the state plan before any money can be spent. The state asked the H-GAC and other councils of government to develop plans for their regions. Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia, whose precinct includes some of the county's hardest-hit communities, said the proposed allocation doesn't come close to meeting recovery needs not covered by insurance or FEMA assistance.

"How can I look Shoreacres in the face?" she asked. "All of these cities in my area got hit the hardest."

Joe Higgs, a community activist with Gulf Coast Interfaith who has followed the allocation process closely, said he was pleased that H-GAC proposed spending 60 percent of the funds on housing and the rest on infrastructure or economic development. This was the minimum level needed for housing recovery, he said, but other Texas councils of government are proposing smaller shares for housing.

Measuring devastation

The proportions vary, however, among community allocations in the H-GAC plan. For Houston, it proposes using 80 percent for housing, while for Harris County only 40 percent would be used for housing.

"That's a number I would question," Higgs said of the 40 percent figure.

Galveston officials couldn't be reached for comment Monday. Emmett, however, said it makes no sense that Houston would receive just a few million dollars less than Galveston under the H-GAC plan.

"I think that there's a huge difference between being devastated by storm surge, with major damage to buildings and infrastructure, as opposed to shingles blown off roofs," Emmett said. "Somebody needs to put some more thought into it."

mike.snyder@chron.com