

Restore homes now to rebuild our county

By Barbara Crews and Mark Davis | Posted: Saturday, January 24, 2009 11:00 pm

As Galveston County rebuilds post-Hurricane Ike questions that beg to be answered are: What do we want to be; how will our communities look; and what will their character be in the next five years?

We have always been an ethnically racially and culturally diverse group of communities and this wonderful mix has given Galveston County our unique and interesting character. How do we preserve this?

We often speak about preserving historic buildings and homes but now we must speak about preserving something more — our people. By helping people repair and rebuild their homes we can hope to retain as many residents as possible and avoid the tremendous population loss that New Orleans faced.

Since the 1960s the city of Galveston's population has steadily declined. The 2000 census showed it had slightly more than 57000 people; five years later but before Ike the population had already declined to slightly more than 53000.

One question many ask now is: How many people will return and how many will be able to afford to live in Galveston?

More than 30000 homes in Galveston County were damaged mostly by flooding from the storm surge; 4600 low-income homeowners were flooded in island ZIP codes 77550 77551 and 77554. The majority of the damaged properties are in the '50 and '51 areas.

Thousands of Texas families are living in hotels FEMA trailers with relatives or in damaged homes and more than 5000 Galveston families have been assigned to the Disaster Housing program because their homes are not livable.

Texas has \$1.3 billion in federal funding for hurricane recovery and could receive as much as \$1 billion more in 2009.

Gov. Rick Perry has charged the Office of Community Rural Affairs with distributing these funds for housing assistance critical infrastructure and economic development.

Galveston County Restore and Rebuild strongly recommends that these funds be divided in the same proportions the Governor identified that these three areas need in "Texas Rebounds" the document he submitted on behalf of the state when asking for federal help.

The governor said that 59 percent of the funds or \$3.4 billion should be used to help families restore their homes 31 percent to repair or build new infrastructure and 10 percent for economic

development.

In the coming weeks the Houston-Galveston Area Council of which County Judge Jim Yarbrough and Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas are members will be considering a plan for distributing these funds.

We believe that restoring and repairing homes in Galveston County so that families can return sooner — rather than in a few years — minimizes the disruption in people's lives and in the lives of their children and helps us retain as much of our population as possible.

Barbara Crews a former Galveston mayor and Mark Davis executive director of Gleanings from the Harvest are co-chairs of Galveston County Restore and Rebuild an organization that assists county families impacted by Hurricane Ike to repair their homes and rebuild their lives. Some of the information in this column was provided by Gulf Coast Interfaith which is a member of Galveston County Restore and Rebuild.