

# Advocates push for more cash for homeowners

By Laura Elder | Posted: Saturday, January 24, 2009 11:00 pm

How local governments spend \$814 million in federal funding meant to help communities recover from hurricanes will determine whether thousands of families return to some of the hardest hit areas or simply walk away leaving entire neighborhoods desolate.

Some advocates for low- and middle-income families the elderly and disabled are calling on local governments to spend that federal funding on helping people repair or rebuild their houses in the worst hit areas including Bacliff Freddiesville Galveston and San Leon before earmarking any for pet public projects to improve streets sewer lines and other infrastructure work.

They want county residents to pressure elected officials to find ways to bypass crippling bureaucracy and disperse federal funding swiftly to rebuild housing and avoid hard lessons from hurricanes Rita and Katrina which struck in 2005 and from which some communities haven't recovered.

In the case of Hurricane Rita which devastated parts of Southeast Texas it took U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 18 months to decide on rules and regulations of distributing money before distributing funding for housing according to reports.

## Lessons Of Rita

Fear of fraud complicated issues of building codes and elevations buyouts and income eligibility not to mention the ever slow wheels of bureaucracy all contributed to getting federal funds flowing after other hurricanes observers say.

“We want the citizens to be mindful of the lessons of Hurricane Rita” said Barbara Crews co-chair of recovery group Galveston County Restore and Rebuild a grass-roots organization. “Time matters and the longer it takes to rebuild and repair houses and making houses safer sanitary and secure the greater the risk of losing these homes and losing the residents to other cities and locations.”

In September Congress appropriated \$23 billion to all disaster areas in 2008. About \$6 billion went through Community Development Block Grants.

Texas got \$1.3 billion and could receive \$1 billion more for restoration of infrastructure housing and economic development.

## Skimming \$262 Million

The \$1.3 billion in Community Development Block Grant funds of which Galveston County will get a share is part of funds appropriated to help areas of the state recover from hurricanes Ike and Dolly.

But before that money is distributed the Office of Rural Community Affairs skim off 5 percent or \$65.7 million for administrative costs and will set aside another 15 percent or \$197 million to reimburse councils of governments for expenses incurred by planning engineering design and public hearings officials with the state office said Friday.

Crews and other proponents of using funds for housing assistance say the number of administrative costs is startling.

“It’s a huge number for administration and it would be wonderful if all the money could go directly to services” Crews said.

### Public Input

The Office of Rural Community Affairs will then administer the remaining funds to 11 local councils of governments which includes the Houston-Galveston Area Council. The council which represents 13 counties will get \$814 million.

The council is working to meet a Feb. 17 deadline to shape up plans on how to distribute the grants among the counties and how much funding will be used for three categories — housing infrastructure restoration and economic revitalization.

After the council firms up a plan it will present it to the public for input. But Crews and other recovery advocates are urging county residents to speak up now about how those funds are spent. Along with Kerry Neves a Dickinson City Council member two other representatives on the Houston-Galveston Area Council are island Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas and County Judge Jim Yarbrough.

### Follow Perry’s Lead?

Galveston County Restore and Rebuild and member group Gulf Coast Interfaith a coalition of religious congregations are urging the area council to follow Gov. Rick Perry’s lead when deciding how federal funding should be distributed among housing assistance infrastructure and economic development.

In November Perry submitted the Texas Rebounds report to the federal government requesting the state receive a total of \$29.4 billion in federal funds to help recover from Hurricane Ike. Of that Perry said housing assistance funding for state and local governments to repair infrastructure — utilities public buildings and equipment — and economic development required \$5.89 billion in federal funding. In the breakdown 59 percent would go to housing assistance 32 percent to infrastructure and 9 percent for economic development.

Galveston County Restore and Rebuild and Gulf Coast Interfaith whose members are racing to help families who can’t wait years for federal help are urging the council to follow Perry’s lead in prioritizing the fund by dedicating 59 percent of the \$814 million to help families return to their homes.

## ‘Get The People Back Home’

Hurricane Ike damaged 30000 homes countywide according to the groups. At least 4600 houses occupied by low-income families were flooded in one of the most catastrophic storms the city had seen in more than a century.

Few local leaders have clearly voiced concern about families unable to rebuild or move back into their homes said Joe Compian a member of Gulf Coast Interfaith. Compian worries that cities including Galveston face a huge population drop if houses aren't saved.

Before the storm the island's population was at about 57000. Most recent estimates are at little more than 40000 city officials have said.

“Very few are pushing for the housing side” Compian said. “The ultimate goal is to get the people back home. Nobody seems to be articulating that.”

But some Houston-Galveston Area Council members say they are pushing for housing assistance. And some don't foresee a tug-of-war over federal funding.

“I don't see that at all” Thomas said. “The priority is to cooperate and to partner with all the entities hit by the storm and to work together for as much funding for housing as well as infrastructure.”

In order to rebuild the city must have a solid infrastructure Thomas said.

## ‘Balancing Act’

But spending most of the money for individuals and not enough for repairs to infrastructure might not be the wisest use of federal funding said Neves who represents 30 cities in the 13 counties with populations less than 20000 including La Marque and Santa Fe.

“I obviously want these grants to go as far as they can and have as big of an impact as they can” Neves said. “If you start giving more to individuals there's a chance of diluting some of that impact; by the same token I know a lot of people are hurting that can use it. It's a balancing act.”

Yarbrough did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Housing money has to be distributed soon said Steve McIntyre also a member of Gulf Coast Interfaith. Members of Gulf Coast Interfaith have been providing materials and labor to families without enough insurance or Federal Emergency Management Agency aid.

“There are a lot of houses to be saved” McIntyre said. “We just have to get at it now.”