

Island's share of federal relief funds increased

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HOUSTON — The Houston-Galveston Area Council on Tuesday voted to give Galveston \$87 million more in federal disaster relief funding than it had previously recommended.

But the island's increase came at the county's expense.

In an almost unanimous vote, the council's board of directors, made up of 35 elected officials from the council's 13-county region, agreed to cut Galveston County's allocation by \$70.8 million, from \$236.7 million to \$165.8 million.

The council's recommendation will go to the state for final approval later this week.

Although not happy with the reduction, Galveston County Judge Jim Yarbrough said he could live with it.

Island officials, on the other [JUMP]hand, left the meeting with exultant smiles.

Accentuating his excitement with a little fist pump in the air, City Manager Steve LeBlanc was already talking about how the city planned to spend its \$267.4 million share of the region's \$814 million relief package.

The funds were approved by federal legislators less than a month after Hurricane Ike made landfall on Sept. 13, causing widespread destruction along the upper Texas coast.

"We've never been through this before, but we plan on doing it right," LeBlanc said.

Between 5 percent and 10 percent of the total, \$13.3 million to \$26.7 million, is likely to be set aside for administration, he said.

LeBlanc plans to hire a consultant to help the city select and complete housing and infrastructure repair projects. Under state guidelines, all of the relief funding must be spent within two years.

Several of the council's members questioned Galveston's ability to spend so much money so quickly.

Flexibility Recommended

Making sure none of the money was wasted should be the council's top priority, Yarbrough said.

"If we receive more money than we can spend, don't waste it," he said. "For heaven's sake, don't let it go back to Washington."

The council is recommending the state allow the money allocated to the region to be traded between communities, if any is left unspent.

Most communities receiving funds must spend 60 percent of the money on housing and 40 percent on infrastructure projects. But the council also is recommending the state allow funds to be moved between categories if communities can't find enough eligible projects in each one.

Houston Loses

The council released its first recommendation for dividing the funds Feb. 6.

Officials from the city of Galveston and Harris County protested their allocations, saying Houston was getting more money than it deserved because the council had given too much weight to the amount of housing damage that would cost less than \$8,000 to repair.

Ninety-six percent of all damaged property in Houston fall into that category.

Under the adopted recommendations, Houston will get only \$109 million, down from \$172 million.

Successful lobbying

Members of Galveston County Interfaith, a coalition of churches from all across the county, lobbied the council to reduce its emphasis on the minimal damage category, part of the change in analysis that took funding from both Houston and Galveston County.

But Thursday, the group said it was concerned about the drop in funding for the county.

“There is tremendous need all over the county, and we need to ensure that other cities and unincorporated areas receive the help they need, too,” said Joe Compian, a leader of the group from Holy Rosary Church. “We will work with them to ensure that they get a bigger share of any future funding.”

Members of Interfaith and Galveston County Restore and Rebuild, an organization formed after Hurricane Ike to help homeowners in the low- to moderate-income bracket repair their damaged houses, also lobbied the council to dedicate 60 percent of the total funding to housing.

Although the percentages differ by city, the council’s recommendations came close to meeting Interfaith’s request, with 56 percent of the overall funding going to housing and 44 percent going to infrastructure and economic development.

Waiting on the next round

Most of the officials and council members who spoke against the funding allocations said they were counting on the next round to be more in their favor.

The federal relief package included a total of \$6.5 billion. Only \$2.1 billion has been allocated to qualifying states so far.

The council expects to get word on a second allocation, a social services block grant, by mid to late summer.

Several of the council’s members from smaller counties said they were worried their communities did not get enough money, especially for infrastructure repairs.

“The city of Houston has the ability to take care of those needs,” Montgomery County Judge Nate McDonald said. “Those of us in smaller coastal communities do not.”