Articles on Recovery Efforts in Galveston
After Hurricane Ike

The Economist
January 31, 2009
U.S. Edition

Blown in the wind: The aftermath of Hurricane Ike

Texas's Gulf coast faces a long road to recovery

JAMES CLARK was not exactly surprised when Hurricane Ike swept across Galveston Island, destroying his camper and damaging his scrap of beach-front property. It was not the first hurricane to hit the Gulf coast of Texas, and not the first to hit him. "I lost my property in Carla in '61, in '83—what was that, Alicia?—and then again this time. But I'm 70, so I guess I probably won't ever learn," he said.

Mr Clark kicked the carpeted floor of the island's stately convention centre. It was January 7th, and he had turned up for a public hearing on the region's recovery from Ike. Behind him, a wall of windows showed a thin strip of beach. Half a dozen dump trucks were beetling around with loads of supplemental sand. Nearby there were piles of debris and the skeletons of houses shredded by the storm.

Ike made landfall in Texas more than four months ago. Yet Galveston and the surrounding coastal towns are far from recovery. The main issue is money. On January 12th the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released a report estimating that the damage to Texan homes, schools, roads and general infrastructure would reach tens of billions of dollars. Private insurance will cover some of that, but many homeowners are finding that they were covered only against damage by wind, not water. In any case, the state does not have the money to fix everything at once. On January 12th its comptroller warned legislators to expect a $9.1 billion revenue shortfall in 2010-11. Texas is waiting for federal aid. And that is slow in coming—though the Galveston County Recovery Fund reports receiving a personal cheque from Barack Obama.

In the meantime, Galveston's problems are multiplying. At the public hearing, legislators spent hours listening to tales of woe from all directions. One city official said that it was uncertain how many Galvestonians had returned to the island. Before the storm the city had 58,000 residents; based on water usage, perhaps 40% are still gone. This squares with
a report from the school superintendent. Enrolment is down sharply and four schools are still closed. The city manager said that despite a hiring freeze and pay cuts, Galveston is almost desperate for money. The next step will be slashing services.

Perhaps the biggest question-mark is over the future of the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), a hospital complex that includes a top-ranking trauma centre and medical school. Before the storm it was Galveston's biggest employer, with 12,500 workers. But UTMB sustained more than $1 billion-worth of damage and losses, with only $100m of it insured. With most of its operations halted since September, the hospital has been losing tens of millions of dollars each month.

On the day of the hearing the emergency room was empty, tarpaulins hung in some hallways and a small white boat was marooned in an adjoining parking lot. The hospital is known for serving uninsured and underinsured people, but Brian Zachariah, the director of emergency medicine, reckons that it will have to cut back on this. In another cost-cutting measure, 2,400 workers were laid off in November.

Some Galvestonians believe that the university's regents are not doing enough to help UTMB. For if the hospital falters, say islanders, it would be devastating for the local economy—a sort of second Ike, for people still struggling after the first.

USA TODAY

April 24, 2009 Friday
FINAL EDITION

Victims feel forgotten since Ike: Recovery seems slow on Texas peninsula

GILCHRIST, Texas -- More than seven months after Hurricane Ike wrecked this unincorporated town and the rest of Bolivar Peninsula, it's still in ruins.

Before the storm, there were more than 300 buildings in Gilchrist; now there are fewer than a dozen. Debris is piled along roads and trapped in dying trees. The beachfront is lined with pilings on which homes once stood.

"Nothing's left. A lot of people are gone -- just gone," says Billy Flannigan, 40, a contractor whose four-bedroom home was swept away. "No one knows about us and our problems."
Former president George H.W. Bush hopes to change that on Saturday, when he will join volunteers on Bolivar Peninsula to clean up beaches and streets and try to reinvigorate the Bush-Clinton Coastal Recovery Fund.

The fund, headed by Bush and former president Bill Clinton, has raised $2.2 million in cash and $1 million in pledges -- a fraction of the $130 million the two raised for Hurricane Katrina relief, says former secretary of State James Baker, its chairman. The money will go to infrastructure projects.

In an interview in his Houston office, Bush urged Ike victims to "have hope. People are trying to help you, want to help you, and the game's not over."

Ike's aftermath has received less attention from television and print news media and celebrities than Hurricane Katrina, Bush says, probably because Katrina's death toll was higher and because New Orleans has a special place in many Americans' hearts.

Katrina killed about 1,600 people in the USA; 48 died in Ike.

The global recession has made it harder for individuals and foreign countries to contribute now, Bush says. Many Americans, he says, probably think, "you know, I feel sorry for them, but what about my job? What about what's happening to me, what's happening to our country in terms of the economy?"

Renewing attention will spur more donations, Baker says. "The need is really great, and when people understand the need, they tend to respond."

Seeking more help

Texas victims of Hurricane Ike have received more than $2 billion in federal assistance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency says, including $28.1 million for Bolivar Peninsula.

More help is needed, says Galveston County Commissioner Patrick Doyle, who represents the peninsula. He wants FEMA to continue to reimburse 100% of the cost of debris removal and to allow the county to use federal community development funds for projects such as fire stations.

Galveston has gotten more attention since Ike hit on Sept. 13, 2008, Doyle says, but Bolivar Peninsula "was ground zero." Before Ike, the peninsula's population was about 12,000, he says. Now, it's no more than 2,000. Almost 4,000 of Bolivar's 6,200 structures were destroyed or so badly damaged they had to be demolished, he says.

The attention Bush will draw to the area Saturday "is a step in the right direction," Doyle says. "Texans will take care of their own businesses and get back after it, but the assistance is needed, because we're hurting."
'Bring back Bolivar'

Ike's scars are apparent in Galveston. Some homes and businesses are still boarded up or being rebuilt, but bars, restaurants and hotels along the Gulf of Mexico are bustling.

On Bolivar, which is reached from Galveston by a car ferry, the contrast is striking. Only a few businesses are open. One grocery store operates out of a trailer. Some reconstruction is underway, but scores of buildings with their roofs or walls peeled off are untouched. A fenced-in enclosure holds hundreds of destroyed cars and trucks. Fields where cattle once roamed are empty. A sign tacked on a pole reads, "Bring back Bolivar."

Curtis Morgan, 54, lost his 750-square-foot dream home in Gilchrist to Ike. He and his wife, Nancy, returned a week after the hurricane to find their house, barn, tropical gardens and swimming pool gone. A neighbor who refused to evacuate and her daughter died in the Category 2 hurricane, which hit with 110-mph winds and killed 17 people in Galveston County.

The Morgans live in an RV on their property and won't rebuild the house, but flowers are blooming and a grill and fireplace are in the yard.

He hopes the community will be reborn, but he's not optimistic. "Everyone has forgotten what happened here," he says.

Bush says people shouldn't lose hope. Texans always "bounce back," he says, but "it's going to take awhile."

---

The New York Times

February 9, 2009 Monday
Late Edition - Final

**FEMA Is Faulted on Aid After Hurricane Ike**

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has denied nearly 650,000 applications for housing aid since Hurricane Ike hit southeastern Texas, finding that nearly 90 percent of claimants were ineligible for aid.

Those rejected and their lawyers say the inspectors are unqualified or poorly trained and the inspection system is flawed in ways that withhold help from deserving people. The agency says the numbers reflect a widespread misunderstanding of its mission.
The Houston Chronicle reported Sunday that the agency had received more than 730,000 applications for money to help with home repairs, mobile homes or other housing services needed after the hurricane caused widespread damage in September. So far, the agency has paid out about $371 million to 82,000 applicants, declaring almost 650,000 ineligible for aid.

A lawyer for a homeowner challenging his assistance from the agency as insufficient told the newspaper that the gap between applicants and paid claims is caused in part by unqualified or poorly trained FEMA inspectors.

The lawyer, Mark J. Grandich, said that it seemed that the agency had "hired a bunch of people, basically just anybody, and put them on the street after one day of training."

At the peak of its individual assistance program late last year, the agency and its contractors sent as many as 2,360 inspectors to document damage to homes. Critics charge that these inspectors are motivated to work quickly because they are paid a flat fee per inspection and must cover most of their own expenses.

The agency refused to discuss individual cases with The Chronicle. But officials acknowledged that inspectors sometimes make mistakes and encouraged people to file appeals if they believe they were unfairly denied assistance.

Most times, eligibility is obvious, said Timothy Cannon, an agency inspections supervisor. "It's not a tough question."

He said people sometimes do not understand the limits of the agency's help. The agency will pay only for home repairs that are not covered by insurance and will provide only enough money to make the home safe, secure and functional.

For example, in a house with two bedrooms and a single occupant, the agency will not pay to repair the second bedroom if the other is still habitable, Mr. Cannon said. It will pay to patch a leaky roof, but not to replace it, he said.