

EYE OF THE STORM

Report of the Governor's Commission to Rebuild Texas

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hurricane Harvey slammed into the Texas Gulf Coast just before 10 pm on August 25, 2017. The storm came ashore just northeast of Corpus Christi and quickly devastated Texas coastal communities with 130 mile-per-hour winds and a six-foot storm surge. From there, the storm moved eastward, leaving a path of destruction that covered an area of Texas the size of New Jersey. By the time the storm left the state, dozens of Texas counties and millions of Texans had been affected.

As part of his effort to respond quickly and effectively in the storm's aftermath, Governor Greg Abbott created the Governor's Commission to Rebuild Texas headed by Texas A&M University System Chancellor John Sharp. The commission's role was to "oversee the response and relief effort between the state and local governments to ensure victims of the storm get everything they need as quickly as possible" and to be "involved in the rebuilding process, focusing on restoring roads, bridges, schools and government buildings in impacted communities."

This report of the commission describes how our state responded to the disaster, and how Texans began the long road to recovery. The report is the product of months of effort by the commission and its many

partners, based on hundreds of hours of interviews and after-action reports. It provides a detailed account of the storm and offers recommendations for improving our response to future disasters.

The clearest and most important message we took from the commission's work is that Hurricane Harvey was a warning we should heed. The magnitude of the devastation caused by the storm is almost unimaginable to those who didn't live through it or visit the disaster area repeatedly, as Governor Abbott and Commissioner Sharp did in the weeks following the storm. The enormous toll on individuals, businesses and public infrastructure should provide a wakeup call underlining the *urgent* need to "future-proof" the Gulf Coast — and

indeed all of Texas — against future disasters. This report includes the commission's recommendations about how we can begin this process.

We found that Texas is a national leader in responding to disasters, whether a hurricane along the Gulf Coast or a Panhandle wildfire. Emergency management in Texas is highly organized and well run by professionals who know their jobs and move quickly and decisively. However, we have identified ways the state can improve the current system by unifying the state's response and recovery responsibilities, and by providing better information, training and more effective application of emerging technologies. Texas must be an innovator in the field of emergency management as well as a leader.

We particularly need to do a better job during the long and difficult process of recovery — what is done in the weeks and months after a disaster to restore Texans, their communities and economies to a point where they are as good as or better than before disaster struck.

In this regard, the task ahead matches the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) national strategic priorities: To build a culture of preparedness, to be ready for future disasters, and to reduce complexity.

Texas also needs to be better prepared for future disasters. Harvey was a tragedy for many Texans, but it also taught us valuable lessons about how to build a state that is ready for future challenges. We should not allow the opportunity for improvement to pass without action. We need to ensure that state capabilities for emergency response are organized, trained and equipped for whatever challenges lie ahead. We need to have better trained local officials and emergency managers.

Accomplishing these goals requires better communication with the communities affected by a disaster, better and timelier assistance to survivors, better coordination of recovery efforts, stronger partnerships with the federal agencies that provide funding and assistance during major disasters, and improved strategies for bringing state and federal resources to bear in time of need.

For example, during Hurricane Harvey, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service agents in a new role aided state-local communications by serving as a "force multiplier" for professionals already in the field and working with city and county officials on a daily basis. We believe this strategy should be developed and extended further. We should work more closely with our federal partners like FEMA to streamline

assistance programs and simplify the inevitable mountains of paperwork.

We also need to help individual Texans be better prepared by providing them with better and more accessible information about future risks. We need to stop making the old mistakes in local development that expose homes and businesses to risks that only become apparent when disaster strikes. To paraphrase the old saying, an ounce of preparation is worth a pound of cure.

We must make the Texas Gulf Coast — and indeed the entire state — more resilient and better able to withstand future disasters, whether the threat comes from hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, flooding or other disasters, a process Governor Abbott has called "future-proofing" our state.

The effects of an event like Harvey can't be eliminated but they *can* be reduced. With billions of federal, state and local dollars being spent in Texas to repair and replace what Harvey destroyed, it is essential that we don't simply replace what was destroyed but that we also increase the state's resilience. As Commissioner Sharp said last year: "Future-proofing the state's coastal areas requires a long-term commitment and investment to improve the resiliency of our communities and institutions. To succeed, the task needs both the continued partnership and financial support of the federal government."

To accomplish this, we must do a better job of setting priorities and identifying the key improvements that can contribute to a more resilient Texas. That means maintaining an inventory of what needs to be done when funding is available. It means creating an effective state-local planning process for improvement of our infrastructure and our communities, both along the coast and, again, in all of Texas.

Future-proofing Texas means recognizing that the future is uncertain and that investing in strategic improvements now in recognition of future uncertainties is not only a good idea, but also good policy.

In 1900, the most devastating hurricane in U.S. history swept Galveston, killing between 6,000 and 12,000 people. While many storms have lashed the island since then, many fewer people have suffered and much less damage has been done. The reason for this can be attributed to two lessons learned in that tragic year. First, the people of Galveston were better prepared and took approaching storms more seriously. And second, they elevated an entire island and built a seawall. We should recognize that those lessons remain vital and relevant to Texas today — and tomorrow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER 4

1. Reorganize emergency management functions to unify the most critical emergency response and recovery functions.
2. Update and expand the Texas Emergency Management Council.

CHAPTER 5

1. Consider appropriating additional funds from the existing Emergency Radio Infrastructure Account to fund radio infrastructure.
2. Strengthen the role of the Texas A&M Veterinary Emergency Team by giving it a more appropriate designation in the State of Texas Emergency Management Plan and consider additional appropriations.

CHAPTER 6

1. Create a catastrophic debris management plan and model guide for local use.
2. Improve contracting for debris removal.
3. Study the issues surrounding the removal of “wet” debris.
4. Improve the process for applying for D-SNAP benefits during a major disaster.
5. Investigate the possibility of creating a state case management program administered by the Health and Human Services Commission.
6. Determine the feasibility of developing a single intake form for disaster victims to complete to determine their eligibility for disaster programs.
7. Improve oversight, accountability, and availability of individuals in the building trades offering services to disaster survivors.

8. Institutionalize the use of extension agents from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service as a “force extender” in support of the Texas Division of Emergency Management.
9. Use available state resources, such as staff from AgriLife Extension, TEEEX and other state agencies, to create a recovery task force to provide specialized assistance for communities and individuals in areas like financial issues, federal assistance programs, and recovery and resiliency planning to speed recovery at the local level.
10. Set up a response team at the state level to respond to questions and other inquiries from local emergency management officials.
11. Organize ongoing briefings at least quarterly or as needed to inform legislators, their staffs, and appropriate agency personnel on hazard threats and disasters.
12. Ensure the state is prepared to quickly develop and present a well-reasoned report to the federal government listing projects requiring federal funding after large-scale disasters.
13. Clarify requirements local elected officials must meet to communicate in emergency situations under the state’s Open Meetings Act.
14. Develop a process to capture vehicle identification information in FEMA’s vehicle assistance program.
15. Explore ways to solve the issue of titling trailers in the FEMA temporary housing program.
16. Compile and maintain a comprehensive list of all the regulatory waivers needed during a disaster to expedite suspensions in any future event.
17. Increase utility customers’ awareness of utility payment relief programs.
18. Grant the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) authority to pre-purchase food and water and stockpile these essentials for each hurricane season.
19. Study and recommend ways to resolve restrictions of home owner associations or local jurisdictions impeding debris removal or trailer placement for short-term housing during disasters.

CHAPTER 7

1. Establish a special study committee to evaluate and propose options for a state-local partnership to help future-proof Texas against flood events on a watershed basis.
2. Establish and fund a new Institute for a Disaster Resilient Texas to be established within Texas A&M University.
3. Investigate ways to improve the hardening of utilities and facilities.
4. Create a comprehensive inventory of needed mitigation and resiliency projects statewide and develop a prioritization methodology to guide local, state and federal decision makers.

CHAPTER 8

1. Develop for the Legislature a proposal for training and credentialing emergency management personnel.
2. Review current training courses with the goal of strengthening training for recovery operations for state and local personnel in emergency management.
3. Explore possible expansion of current degree programs in emergency management.
4. Examine and report on ways to strengthen the quality and sharing of data used in emergency management operations.
5. Emphasize to emergency management personnel the importance of working out partnership agreements and contracted services before a disaster strikes.
6. Explore whether the purchasing programs of the Texas Comptroller's office could be tailored to help local jurisdictions with their emergency management needs.
7. Collaborate with Congress and the federal government to improve emergency management laws and policies.
8. Embrace the basic tenets of FEMA's Strategic Plan with its emphasis on cooperation among federal emergency management agencies, state government, local government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and individual citizens to meet the critical basic goals of making the Nation better prepared for and better able to deal with future disasters.
9. Review laws and practices affecting the use of drones during emergency events and recommend changes in operations to promote their use.
10. Establish a single, well publicized state website at the Texas A&M University System that is easy to use and presents important post-disaster information about response and recovery activities.
11. Consider ways to make better use of 911 and social media during disaster response.
12. Explore expansion of the capabilities of the Rebuild Texas application or development of a new mobile app to deliver important information to responders and disaster victims alike.
13. Examine the costs and benefits of promoting a technology standard enabling a wider video representation of a disaster area for first responders.
14. Continue to cultivate relationships with private technology providers to coordinate their assistance in the early days of a disaster when communications systems are damaged or destroyed.
15. Examine ways for the state to apply data analytics to improve disaster management through more effective and timely information.
16. Examine ways to better inform the public about how to prepare for and survive a disaster.
17. Consider appropriating additional funds to expand and improve the state's trauma care network to be better prepared for future disasters.