Gov. Perry Announces Commission for Disaster Recovery and Renewal

Commission will recommend approaches for better disaster recovery coordination.

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Thursday, November 20, 2008

Thank you, Judge Emmett for that kind introduction and thank you for your ongoing leadership as Harris County rebuilds from Hurricane Ike’s devastating effects.

It has been two months since Hurricane Ike blasted the Texas coast, roaring ashore with a combination of high winds and surging waters that laid waste to a significant portion of our Gulf region. Now, two months later, long after our search and rescue teams have returned home, the waters receded and the TV trucks headed on to the next story, this area is still struggling to restore the basics of life. Debris piles are everywhere, people are sleeping in tents near their shattered homes and winter is approaching. We owe our citizens, our neighbors, our family members a united effort to resolve this.

In an effort to accelerate the rebuilding process, I am here today to announce the creation of the Governor’s Commission for Disaster Recovery and Renewal. Led by Judge Eckels, this team will be composed of leaders from across the affected area as well as decision makers from the private sector and all levels of government. Working together, this team will pursue a three-part strategy based on the realities of the situation here on the ground.

To tackle a challenge like this, you need proper funding, coordination between government, business and non-profit groups, and an emphasis on economic development to speed recovery.

On the funding front, my office has been working since before the storm came ashore

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to secure reasonable levels of federal dollars for the recovery effort. All along, we have simply asked that Texas receive the same considerations afforded Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. To be honest, the response from Washington has been underwhelming.

After a presidential disaster declaration, there was an initial burst of federal funding, but that 100% reimbursement for debris removal didn’t last long enough to finish the job. Over a month ago, I asked for 18 months of reimbursement for debris removal and have yet to hear officially from Washington.

Yet, last week, the director of homeland security told leaders in this area that Texas would not receive funding on a par with post-Katrina Louisiana because of our budget surplus. This is not only unprecedented; it is an unacceptable penalty for a state that has exercised tough fiscal discipline over the past few years.

How is it that Washington can shower 700 billion taxpayer dollars on mismanaged Wall Street firms, but can’t spare the funds needed to help Broadway Street in Galveston, Texas Avenue in Bridge City, or Gulfway Drive in Sabine Pass?

Thanks to congressional inaction in Washington, Texans are unlikely to start seeing federal aid until at least next summer. Our coastal region’s significance to our state and national economy is entirely too high to let recovery continue at this snail’s pace. These areas and the folks who live in them need help getting back on their feet and they need it now.

That is why I created the Hurricane Ike Recovery and Coordination Effort last month and commissioned Judge Eckels and my former chief of staff, Brian Newby, to get their arms around the situation down here. Working closely with local leaders, they pulled together a summary of the area’s recovery costs. Brian Newby just returned from Washington DC where he delivered a clear statement of our state’s needs to the Texas congressional delegation and federal officials.

I wish I could tell you I’m optimistic about Washington’s eventual response, but we’re not holding our breath here in Texas. That is why today I am directing TxDOT to take responsibility for debris removal across the affected area. Working with their own crews and contractors, they will take the lead in removing the debris that is obstructing roadways, posing a health risk, and slowing reconstruction.

At the same time, I have established this new Commission for Disaster Recovery and Renewal, and charged them to recommend approaches that will help Texas recover from future storms, like strengthening our critical infrastructure.

However, my immediate concerns center on the Texans who have been displaced by this storm. Post-disaster housing is a nationwide problem with raging debates about formaldehyde levels, local permitting problems, and who is to blame.

We all know the wheels in Washington DC turn slowly, but such a pace is unacceptable when we have Texans sleeping in their cars or in a tent outside a padlocked mobile home. One would think that the federal government would have a workable system after all the disasters they’ve dealt with, but their experts seem to reinvent the wheel every time a crisis arises.

Bottom line, the system doesn’t work and the time for pointing fingers is past. These problems affect Texans so Texans are going to fix them. Instead of waiting for bright ideas from Washington, the members of this commission will work with local officials and business leaders to devise a plan tailored for their communities.

When the next storm hits, that plan will help Texans put their lives back together faster and more efficiently. Texans endured this storm together, and, today, we’re pushing even harder to get life along the coast back to normal.