

Oct. 3, 2005, 8:18AM

LOOKING AHEAD

Lessons sought in Rita mistakes

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For most Houstonians, the debris is raked up and the lights are back on. Those who fled Hurricane Rita are home, and our Hurricane Katrina guests are settling in again. Life is getting back to normal.

And for the public agencies and private businesses that played a role in the twin emergencies, it's time to look back and see what lessons can be learned.

City government

Officials say our experience with Hurricane Rita will help the city weather future storms better.

"Every time you do something, you learn to do it better the next time," said Dennis Storemski, the city's top emergency management official.

Storemski deferred specific observations, but at least one needed fix is obvious: The city wants to avoid a replay of the freeway gridlock, fuel shortages and deaths that resulted from the massive evacuation.

The exodus provided unexpected insight.

City health officials dispatched teams to help Houstonians who fled to other areas. The next time an evacuation is recommended or ordered, there probably will be more staff and they'll be better prepared, said city health department spokeswoman Kathy Barton.

Health workers might compile lists of assisted-living facilities around likely evacuation destinations — Lufkin, for example — so they'd have options other than ill-equipped makeshift shelters for sick, disabled or elderly evacuees.

The city must explore ways to better help assisted-living residents, Mayor Bill White has said. He said some of the facilities' operators, who have their own

evacuation plans, didn't come through. That meant the city and others had to step in.

Other issues include determining whether relying heavily on city cell phones is a liability, whether the city had enough gasoline ready to use and whether the 311 service help line performed as planned.

--MATT STILES AND BILL MURPHY

Transportation agencies

The contraflow plan that state transportation officials executed as Hurricane Rita bore down on the Gulf Coast was invented on the spot, said Texas Department of Transportation spokeswoman Janelle Gbur. The measure — using both sides of a highway for traffic going in one direction — had been seen as a last resort because it requires lots of police officers to prevent wrong-way traffic.

TxDOT officials now know they need a real contraflow plan, as well as up-to-the-minute information about traffic conditions outside Houston, so bottlenecks can be quickly spotted and corrected, she said.

A future plan, Gbur said, would define participants' roles in advance and provide such infrastructure improvements as gates at intervals on major routes to let traffic cross safely and quickly into the opposing lanes, strategically placed cameras and sensors to inform officials of obstacles and traffic slowdowns, and signs to flash warnings and messages to motorists.

Houston TranStar has such a system for the metro area, but there is nothing similar for the wide stretches between cities.

"At key intersections along the route, we'd like to have camera surveillance instead of calling the Texas Burger in Schulenburg and asking how traffic is moving," Gbur said.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority declined to talk until it has completed an internal report on the subject, spokesman George Smalley said.

Harris County Judge Robert Eckels said the hurricane showed the need for a high-speed

passenger rail link from Galveston to Houston and points inland. Metro's mobility plan calls for a commuter rail to Galveston but does not say when it will be built.

--RAD SALLEE

State government

Kathy Walt, spokeswoman for Gov. Rick Perry, agreed that the state needs a plan to ensure fuel supplies are adequate in commercial stations and a way to distribute emergency supplies to stranded motorists. A task force appointed Friday by Perry includes several oil company representatives.

On Sept. 24, as the storm was passing through East Texas, White criticized the state for not having fuel in place for evacuees.

Walt said state emergency management officials also will be reviewing the timeline that led the evacuation.

--JANET ELLIOTT

Law enforcement

Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt thinks one solution to evacuation problems on the ground might come from the air.

"If we had aircraft monitoring the entire process from Interstate 10 to San Antonio and Interstate 45 to Dallas, we would be able to feed information to anywhere in the system, telling us where it broke down and what the contributing factors were," the chief said.

Hurtt and Lt. John Martin, spokesman for the Harris County Sheriff's Department, both noted they will have to address the same problem that confronted many evacuees: getting gasoline to officers.

Hurtt said helicopters might be part of the solution there, too.

"We need to look at the fuel supply and how we can help fuel trucks find the safest way in," he said. Also, he added, "something you have to do is also

free up a series of back roads and alternative routes to have a main emergency vehicle corridor."

--ROBERT CROWE

Harris County government

Before Rita, county officials were unsure whether residents would heed calls to evacuate.

Now they know.

Officials ordered a mandatory evacuation of 1.2 million residents in the storm surge zone. Those people fled, as did an additional 1.3 million outside the zone who were fearful of the approaching storm.

"There was some concern about whether people would take these calls seriously," Eckels said.

County, city, regional and state officials now will have to plan for larger evacuations, he said.

He said evacuation planners should establish temporary rest areas for evacuees, as well.

Harris County Sheriff Tommy Thomas said evacuation orders timed to move people out at intervals might ease gridlock, though he added that he isn't sure residents would heed an evacuation schedule.

On another front, Eckels said the loss of electricity was too high, especially since the storm did not hit Houston dead-on.

Power outages shut down a pumping station, jeopardizing water supplies to Baytown, half of Houston and Ship Channel industries.

Power was restored before water ran out, but Eckels said steps should be taken to provide pumping stations with more reliable backup power.

Finally, the judge noted, Houston police and firefighters occasionally had trouble communicating with county and other local emergency agencies, and that new radios could ease that problem.

--BILL MURPHY

The insurance industry

As insurers continue to tally the damage, the organization that sells windstorm coverage to property owners in coastal counties may ask the Legislature to help it to raise more funds. That could include giving the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association the ability to issue revenue bonds and lifting a cap that keeps it from raising rates more than 10 percent a year.

In the meantime, analysts say, property owners can expect rates to rise as companies reassess their exposure to natural disasters, reinsurers raise the rates they charge insurers and companies pass along assessments they are charged by the windstorm insurance association.

After a catastrophe, the law lets the agency assess insurers throughout the state to pay for the first \$100 million in losses. It then draws on reinsurance and a catastrophe fund before turning to more assessments.

Companies are assessed based on their market share in Texas, not whether they administer policies for the association.

Hurricanes Rita and Katrina also could add fuel to talks of forming a federal natural disaster insurance program, similar to the flood insurance program. Also likely to add to the debate are Katrina-related lawsuits brought by policyholders and the Mississippi attorney general attempting to void provisions in policies that exclude coverage for losses caused by floods.

--PURVA PATEL

The energy industry

The one-two punch of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita showed just how vulnerable the U.S. energy supply chain can be.

"At least maybe people will still start thinking about some of these issues," said Amy Myers Jaffe, an energy fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute.

Some of the issues:

- Refined fuel storage. With several Gulf Coast refineries that upgrade crude oil into gasoline, diesel and jet fuel knocked out by the storms, energy companies scrambled to import finished products. They've made up much of that shortfall, partly because some European Union countries require stores of refined fuel stocks to be kept, Jaffe said. The U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve holds crude oil, but crude doesn't run cars.

- Domestic conservation and drilling. The epicenter of U.S. energy is Hurricane Alley in the Western Central Gulf, said energy investment banker Matthew Simmons. In addition to making real efforts to cut transportation fuel use, he suggests drilling in the outer continental shelf of all of North America. Only then will we find "enough to make a difference," he said.

- Transmission lines. The country's power grid is Balkanized and full of bottlenecks. Pat Wood, former chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, said that is because companies nationwide that own the poles and wires have not invested enough money in maintaining and upgrading their systems. New spending is needed such upgrades as installing high-voltage pathways, performing super technical maintenance on high-lines using helicopters and routine tree trimming.

--LYNN J. COOK

Other local businesses

Hurricane Rita taught local companies a few things.

San Antonio-based H-E-B, which has gone through its share of hurricanes in its 100-year history, moved quickly to restock its area grocery stores. But, as thousands flocked to stores for items such as milk and bread, so too did restaurants and convenience stores.

"We really became not just a retailer but a wholesaler," said H-E-B President Scott McClelland. "We still haven't completely filled up with bread. That's something for us to learn next time through."

The massive exodus from the Houston area jammed cell phone networks, though Cingular reports that it successfully adjusted its network before people started coming back. Yet cell phone companies found that even when their networks were

congested, text messaging functioned without a hitch. The service, which is available on most cell phones, takes up little space on a network.

--*JOHN C. ROPER*

Social/medical services

The deaths of so many elderly residents during the evacuation has state and local officials rethinking when and how the elderly and the sick should be moved.

"I think they need to educate themselves about the frailty of the population they are dealing with and apply different decision-making standards," said Patti Aldredge, a clinical instructor at the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work, whose own mother was evacuated from a Woodville nursing home.

Government officials, medical providers and experts in the care of the elderly and the infirm will be working in the coming months on a detailed report addressing such issues as who should make the decision to move a nursing-home resident — their physician, their loved ones or the nursing home — and when and how to set up temporary clinics for special-needs patients, including the terminally ill and mentally retarded.

--*MELANIE MARKLEY*