

Coastal growth in all the right places

FEMA funds growth-planning program at Texas A&M to enable communities to turn risks into resilience

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Are coastal communities in Texas factoring storm into their plans for growth? What new state and federal regulations affect local policies on development? How can governmental officials and citizens make better decisions about growth—decisions that will improve their community’s quality of life as well as save lives, property, and headaches?

To help local officials and citizens make sense of the many challenges and opportunities involved in growth planning, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has awarded a Community Engagement and Risk Communication (CERC) grant to the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Texas Sea Grant. TAMU’s Texas Coastal Watershed Program will lead this effort.

The CERC program focuses on building risk awareness and understanding at the local level. It also supports local planning efforts to reduce the risks posed by natural hazards.



The CHARM software tool enables leaders and citizens to map different growth options and see how they would affect the risks of flooding and other hazards.



Buffalo Bayou flooding from Tropical Storm Allison.

Source: Houston Chronicle

The grant will fund the creation of three projects to bring university resources to bear on local problems. These projects include resiliency workshops and support for counties, training and education for city officials, and a workshop-mapping platform for local leaders and the public.

County resiliency support: This part of the project will introduce new data and tools that can help the counties determine how to grow while reducing flooding risks to neighborhoods and businesses.

Because each community has different challenges and opportunities, AgriLife Extension personnel will work with coastal counties individually to identify their flood-planning options and to align state and federal resources with their needs locally.

Training for city leaders: The Texas Coastal Citizen Planner program was developed specifically for locally elected and appointed municipal officials. It is a five-session course that explains legal and regulatory issues pertaining to municipal planning; follow-up courses will cover the types of policies that cities can adopt to reduce risks from specific physical hazards such as floods.

Workshop mapping for citizens and officials: FEMA resources will be used to expand the reach of a software tool, Community Health and Resources Management (CHARM), to additional communities large and small across Texas. The CHARM platform enables local officials—as well as ordinary local citizens—to visualize how various choices for development and growth could be affected by flood risks.

The platform helps “part the curtain” on complex planning issues, enabling participants to see for themselves, immediately, what the impacts of various planning or growth scenarios might be on the local environment.

County workshops are slated to begin this winter, and the Citizen Planner program will take its first students in 2016. The expanded CHARM project is expected to be online next summer.

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