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Coastal barrier concept for storm surge protection being designed to protect entire Houston-Galveston region from impact of direct-hit hurricanes

Widespread support beginning to mount for proven, cost-effective, preventive solution

HOUSTON — In conjunction with the opening of hurricane season, volunteer members of the Bay Area Coastal Protection Alliance (BACPA), along with government, community and industry leaders, today introduced a storm surge protection concept designed to save the entire Houston-Galveston region from a direct hit by a hurricane.

“In 2008, Hurricane Ike caused loss of life and more than \$35 billion (to date) in property and environmental damage, even without a direct hit,” said Vic Pierson, vice president of BACPA. “The original forecast predicted 25-foot storm surges that could have killed hundreds, left thousands homeless and jobless, and caused economic damage around \$100 billion. Science proves that major hurricanes hit the upper Texas Gulf Coast approximately every 15 years. So, it’s not a matter of if a hurricane will directly hit us in the future, it’s when. We dodged a bullet with Ike. But, we won’t dodge it forever in our current unprotected state.”

The coastal barrier concept for storm surge protection is based on proven technology that has been successfully used for decades in The Netherlands and other parts of the world. The concept features a levee-and-gate system that would extend from High Island westward to San Luis Pass. Highlights include:

- Sand-covered dunes with hardened cores would be placed on the Island’s west end and on Bolivar Peninsula, thereby extending the protection offered by the Galveston Seawall.
- The dunes would connect to surge barriers at San Luis Pass and Bolivar Road – the inlet access into the Houston Ship Channel and Galveston Bay. The barriers allow sea water from the Gulf of Mexico to flow naturally through and into the bay, thereby maintaining the healthy, diverse ecosystem.
- There would be a large gate in the middle of each barrier that would remain open to allow ship passage. In the event of a hurricane, this gate would close, thus stopping storm surge from entering Galveston Bay through the inlet.

“The combination of the sand-covered dunes and the barrier gates would stop storm surge at the coast, preventing it from flowing into the bay,” said Dr. William Merrell, professor, marine scientist and George P. Mitchell Chair of Marine Sciences at Texas A&M University-Galveston, who conceptualized and began championing the concept. “Coastal mitigation, which is what lies at the core of this concept, is the only solution that protects the entire region.”

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The coastal barrier solution would protect residents, property, businesses, the diverse ecosystem and the massive trade, transportation and energy infrastructure of Galveston, Galveston Bay, Houston, the Ports of Houston, Texas City and Galveston and communities in Harris, Galveston, Brazoria and Chambers Counties.

“In the region’s current unprotected state, a direct hit from a hurricane would cause a human and economic tragedy of epic proportions,” said Texas State Senator Larry Taylor, District 11 and co-chair of the Joint Interim Committee to Study Coastal Barriers. “Between the 6 million residents, their properties, jobs and businesses, coupled with the Ports of Houston, Texas City and Galveston and the nation’s largest petrochemical complex, there is too much at stake.”

Based on a study from the Independent Insurance Agents of Texas, a direct hit from a hurricane to the Houston-Galveston region would cost \$73 billion in gross state product, more than 863,000 jobs and \$2.5 billion in annual state revenue. The storm could decimate the Port of Houston, which is the busiest U.S. port in terms of foreign tonnage and second busiest in overall tonnage. The storm could obliterate the nation’s largest petrochemical complex, which supplies 40 percent of the America’s fuel and 60 percent of its specialty military fuel.

“With the Port, the Ship Channel and our refineries shut down for months, the entire country would face gasoline shortages, sky-rocketing prices and crippled international trade,” said Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Jack Morman. “Clearly this is a problem for the United States, not just southeast Texas.”

The proposed coastal barrier concept for storm surge protection is estimated to cost between \$4 and \$6 billion, with the federal government investing 85 percent of the construction costs. Local sources would be required to cover the remaining 15 percent. Once construction begins, the project could be completed within two years.

BACPA, a recently chartered, volunteer-led, nonprofit organization, is championing the effort to build the coastal barrier system for storm surge protection. Volunteers include area scientists, industry leaders, elected officials and citizens concerned with protecting the whole of the Houston-Galveston region. To date, 15 municipalities, cities and regional organizations have joined in support of the coastal barrier concept for storm surge protection.

“While this is significant investment, we are gaining a lot of support because more people are seeing it is a mere fraction of what clean-up and recovery costs would be after a direct hit,” said Bob Mitchell, president of the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership. “Elected officials and business leaders must take responsibility to protect the families and capital assets of this region. Support of media and our neighbors is also essential if we are to complete the necessary studies and do whatever it takes to ensure that the best storm surge suppression system for the region gets built and gets built soon. It’s one of the most critical actions we must take for the future growth of Bay Area Houston.”

For more information, visit www.bacpa.org.

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