

The Daily News.

County resists FEMA request to waive flood standards

- [By MARISSA BARNETT The Daily News](#)

- Jan 6, 2018



A FEMA trailer from Hurricane Ike, which struck in 2008, stands on a lot in Hitchcock.

STUART VILLANUEVA/The Daily News

The Federal Emergency Management Agency wants local governments to waive floodplain elevation requirements for temporary trailers and recreational vehicles provided for people whose residences were flooded during Hurricane Harvey.

Some cities, such as Dickinson, have complied, but county officials have balked, arguing flood permit waivers could put residents at future risk and create major headaches down the road.

The county also is differently situated from cities in that it doesn't have ordinance-creating power over unincorporated areas, County Judge Mark Henry said. So, once a permit is issued it's difficult to rescind, he said.

A city council could vote before the next hurricane season on an ordinance requiring residents' structures be elevated above the 100-year floodplain, he said.

The county's refusal to waive floodplain permits, which are usually required by FEMA for property owners seeking to build in flood zones, has caused some friction between county and FEMA officials, Henry said.

FEMA officials have been pressuring the county's engineering office to allow the agency to put mobile homes in floodplains in unincorporated Galveston County without meeting the agency's usual guidelines.

The Daily News contacted FEMA Hurricane Harvey officials with questions about the policy on Thursday and Friday, but they didn't respond by deadline.

FEMA officials have told the county the permit waivers are temporary and are needed to provide housing to people displaced by flooding from Hurricane Harvey, Henry said.

"The problem is it's never temporary," Henry said, adding that it has taken 10 years to get down to having just a handful of Hurricane Ike FEMA trailers left in flood zones.

“When a year or two passes and FEMA has no more involvement, they won’t come in and say ‘Now you’ve got to move,’ that will fall on the county.”

The county has no plans to back down from its policy to enforce the floodplain permits, even if FEMA keeps up its pressure, Henry said. But Henry doesn’t want the county to be unfairly blamed for the slow recovery response, he said.

“My concern is FEMA will point to us and say we’re causing the delay, which isn’t the case,” Henry said. “We’re doing all we can — we’ve waived permit fees and are contacting the state constantly to find out how to get programs going — but waiving the flood permits for a few mobile homes is not the answer.”

County Engineer Michael Shannon, who is also the floodplain manager, disagrees with FEMA’s request for the permit waiver, he said.

The Galveston County Commissioners Court in December voted against waiving the permits., Henry said.

FEMA has told the county the trailers will only be around for up to 18 months, but that would mean another hurricane season, or possibly more, Shannon said. That creates risks for residents living in the FEMA trailers, he said.

“I would really, really like to believe it would only be 18 months, but my experience is different,” Shannon said. “And even still, that’s another hurricane season and we’ve had temporary homes from Ike flood after they’ve been placed.”

The other concern comes down to consistency, Shannon said. The county processes about 1,100 floodplain permits a year for residents building or adding on to properties in flood zones, he said.

Those rules require residents build above the elevation level that would flood in a 100-year flood, a requirement set by FEMA for compliance with the National Flood Insurance Program, he said. Each year, the county fields hundreds of complaints that the flood rules are too strict, he said.

Allowing FEMA to place trailers that aren’t compliant with those rules could further fuel those complaints by neighbors who perceive an unfair application of rules, he said.

“Now the federal government doesn’t want to follow its own rules and that creates the appearance we have favoritism toward certain property owners and that’s not the intent at all,” Shannon said.

FEMA could elevate the mobile homes, but it would be costly, so the agency is unlikely to do it, Henry said. Without that, residents in unincorporated areas in flood zones would presumably be unable to get trailers or RVs.

FEMA had originally said there would not be trailers or RVs, but instead financial programs to quickly repair flooded homes, which was his preference, Henry said.

As of late December, FEMA had approved 196 survivor families for trailers or travel trailers in Galveston County, agency spokesman Robert Howard said. That figure included areas out of the county’s jurisdiction, including Dickinson and League City. The county’s rules for permits only apply to unincorporated areas such as Bolivar Peninsula, San Leon and Bacliff.

Marissa Barnett: 409-683-5257; marissa.barnet@galvnews.com



[Marissa Barnett](#)

Senior Reporter