

LOWER RIO GRANDE CITIZENS FORUM
USIBWC FIELD OFFICE
Mercedes, TX
August 9, 2017

*Tentative Meeting Notes

Citizens Forum Board Members in attendance:

Rick Cavazos, Mayor, City of Los Indios
Henry Leo, Agent in Charge – Harlingen Border Patrol Station
Sonny Hinojosa, Hidalgo County Irrigation District # 2
Sonia Lambert, Cameron County Irrigation District # 2
Joel Espinoza, USIBWC
Lawrence Drake, Drake Farms
John Goolsby, USDA Research Entomologist, Edinburg

USIBWC Staff in attendance:

Juan Uribe, Area Operations Manager, USIBWC, and Citizens Forum Co-Chair
Esteban Martinez, USIBWC Mercedes Regional Security Officer (RSO)
Frank Martinez, Assistant Area Operations Manager, USIBWC Mercedes LRGFO
Lori Kuczmanski, USIBWC Headquarters, Public Affairs Officer (PAO)

Members of the public in attendance:

Jorge Alcala, Dannenbaum Engineering
John Sparks, ARCADIS
Arturo Cabello, Brownsville Irrigation District
Rick Cantu, City of Edinburg
Ron Whitlock, Ron Whitlock Reports
Ricardo Saldana, Hidalgo County
Maria McLane, Davila \$ Associates
Florence Huff, Citizen
Sarah Merrill, TMN
Joe Tucker, Citizen
Carl Boyd, Citizen
Barry Goldsmith, NOAA/National Weather Service
Jackie Arias, Rio Grande Guardian
Jose A Davila, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
Bill Keltner, La Feria News
David Negrete, Mexican Section, International Boundary and Water Commission
Alfonso Carmona, Mexican Section, International Boundary and Water Commission
Marco Rangel, Quinta Mazatlan WBC
Javier Mendez, City of Harlingen
Marcie Oviedo, Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC)
Terrie G. Salinas, LRGVDC Economic Division
Hector Gonzalez, Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT)
Rex Costley, TXDOT

Berenice Garcia, The Monitor
Ryan Nelson, KRGV-CH5
Jim Darling, Rio Grande Regional Water Authority (RGRWA)
Jaime Flores, Texas Water Research Institute (TWRI)
Rogelio Chanes, Senator Lucio's Office
Maxwell Pons, The Nature Conservancy (TNC_
Raul Sasin, Hidalgo County DrainAge District 2 (HCDD1)
Jaime Salazar, HCDD1
Jorge Gonzalez, HCDD1

Opening Remarks:

At 3:00 p.m., Juan Uribe, Citizens Forum Co-Chair, convened USIBWC Mercedes LRGFO's Quarterly Citizens Forum. Mr. Uribe began with a short welcome and allowed attending board members and those in attendance to introduce themselves. He then introduced the first guest speaker, Mr. Barry Goldsmith to discuss the 50-year history of Hurricane Beulah, which struck the Rio Grande Valley in 1967.

Presentation One: Hurricane Beulah, Then and Now. Is the Valley Ready, 50 years later? Barry Goldsmith, Warning Coordination Meteorologist, National Weather Service

50 years ago this September Hurricane Beulah struck the Rio Grande Valley. The Hurricane traveled nearly 10,000 miles before it made landfall. Beulah started as a category 3/4; it weakened to a tropical storm before it gained its full momentum into a category 5 hurricane. Landfall was September 20, 1967 just after midnight. The floodways failed in at least two places. Wind damage was also a major factor in the destruction of property during the storm. Wind was extreme near the coast and was high inland. Rainfall flooding near the coast wasn't all that bad, the majority of flooding was inland. The Valley didn't have the reservoir system we now have in place and that was a big factor in the flood damage. The Rio Grande River, usually at 50 feet in width, was approximately 2-3 miles wide, with flooding. The water levels varied from 1-5 feet depending on where you were located. In 1967, the floodway did not adequately protect all of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. After Beulah, the floodway was improved. In 2010, additional improvements helped protect the Valley despite equal or greater water flow in the Rio Grande Basin. There were roughly 14,000 refugees from Mexico that crossed into Starr County for emergency assistance. Can the Rio Grande Valley accommodate a large number of refugees if another catastrophic storm were to happen?

The number of residents living in the area has increased from 355,000 in 1967 to almost a million people today. Something to think about if another large storm hits this area. The emergency assistance needed will be a lot greater than in 1967. 37% percent of residents live in poverty, which means they don't live in the best constructed homes. Poorly constructed homes will not survive a Hurricane Beulah-like storm. A lot of newer constructions are using cinder block and upgraded construction codes to sustain storm damage. 90 percent of homes cannot sustain 120 mile an hour winds. Something to think about on your existing house.

We see a lot of flooding in the Valley due to land type, soil type, and the river is a delta, which are known flood areas. We also see this on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Flooding is the number one threat. Hurricanes are a big deal on a seasonal basis. Is the infrastructure keeping up with the growth in the area? I don't have an answer. Some areas are, but is the entire aValley as a whole?

Where are we today? The favorable stuff: coordinated evacuations and sheltering plans, improved hurricane evacuation study. I believe we have a good plan and will be able to support getting large numbers of people out. Atlantic hurricane season is off to a jack rabbit start. But the future impacts depend on the pattern puzzle pieces. Other factors include deep moisture availability and wind shear. We

can never forget that. September is still a wild card. It looks like the coast will steer clear again, which for us would be a seventh consecutive year with no catastrophic storms.

Question:

What I remember was the water caused damage to citrus trees and there were a lot of mosquitos. What would the biological effect have been with a storm today? We have Zika virus, Dengue, and many others.

Answer:

Mr. Goldsmith: I should have added that to the slide. There were a lot of mosquitos swarming when Hurricane Dolly hit the Valley.

Question:

What are the risks with the liquid natural gas facilities on the shore? They are only elevating 12 feet in the path of the storm a surge.

Answer:

Mr. Goldsmith: If they are doing 12 feet above ground level they're looking at a reasonable worst case scenario at that point. In other words, storm surge value at 25 feet won't put 25 feet of water in the ship channel. It's probably going to be more like 15-17 feet. The Beulah surge was 8-14 foot near the coast and would be like 4-9 feet at that location near the ship channel, I'm guessing. An absolute worst case scenario would be much higher than 12 feet. And honestly, I would be planning for an absolute worst case.

Question:

The floodway system is in much better condition now. The system was designed for 187,000 cubic feet per second when Beulah hit. Beulah was 220,000 cubic feet per second and now it's designed for 250,000. The improvements over the last few years have been tremendous. However, in Harlingen there is still going to be problems if a Beulah size storm hits.

Answer: Mr. Goldsmith: The question now becomes, does it spill over 1 or 2 feet of water or does it spill over 8-10. I think it will be lower. But I don't have an answer for that.

Presentation Two: Vehicular Gates installation on Levees: Lori Kuczanski, USIBWC

Yesterday IBWC did a press conference regarding the vehicular gates that have been installed on the levees, and the gates that will be installed along the levees in various counties. I wanted to present the information to you on the need for the vehicular gates on the levees.

It could affect your area of operation. The vehicular gate project started in Peñitas and runs east. There are 5 phases to this project. The first phase is Peñitas to Alamo Road, phase 2 is from Alamo Road to Donna Road, phase 3 is from Donna Road to the end of the North Floodway, phase 4 is the river levee from Hidalgo to Brownsville and phase 5 is the Arroyo Colorado Floodway.

It will take approximately 2 years until all the gates are installed. We have installed approximately 50 gates, and we have about 50 more that need to be installed. We have a lot of unauthorized access and illegal activities on to the levee system. Securing the levee has been a slow process due to funding and manpower limitations. The vehicular gates are red in color and have signs in English and Spanish reading no trespassing, no hunting, no fishing, no swimming, restricted access, government property and the field office phone number is listed. We have also secured the side of the levee from the grass to the gate due to people driving around the gate. One of the objectives is to stop the vehicular traffic causing damage to the levee. We are hoping the gates will stop and deter this activity. We also have a large amount of illegal dumping on the levee. The dumping ranges from garbage, old tires, and animal carcasses, shoes, construction material, and household items. USIBWC must clean up the items using manpower that is

already limited and is needed for other projects.

USIBWC has met with local law enforcement and they will be ticketing and arresting any trespasser that does not have permission to be on the levee. We hope this will also deter individuals from illegally using the levee. USIBWC is giving keys to the gates to those that have business and a need to be on the levee. This may be a rancher or farmer, someone who lives in the area, and of course law enforcement. If you need a key to the gates, please contact us. We are very willing to work with you.

Question:

Can we put up more gates so the border wall isn't needed and won't be constructed?

Answer:

Lori Kuczanski replied: IBWC isn't involved in the president's border wall construction. The border wall is a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) project. We will continue to secure our levee to prevent illegal activity

Question:

Will emergency response persons have access to the gates on the levee?

Answer:

Juan Uribe replied: Yes, all federal, state, and local authorities will have access to the gates on the levee. The USIBWC Mercedes field office has the keys. Please contact us if you need a key. We are willing to work with people who have a need to be on the levee. This is primarily to prevent people who do not need to be on the levee.

Question:

Was there an article in The Monitor in this morning's paper?

Answer:

Lori Kuczanski replied: Yes, we had some media out there yesterday as well. It made the front page of The Monitor. I'm somewhat neutral on the article. They really tried to tie in the border wall, although the project of securing our levees has nothing to do with the border wall. I called the reporter to talk to him about that and he said this was his editors' doing and they just wanted to tie that in. Again, the vehicular gates on the levees have nothing to do with the border wall. I explained that to him prior to the media event.

Future Agenda Items

Update from Constable Office, Precinct 3 on illegal activity on levees and surrounding area. Number of trespassers caught/fined/arrested. Did the news conference help?

Update from Water Accounting on the water debt from Mexico

Update from Clean Rivers Program on water quality from the Rio Grande

Update from USIBWC Engineering Services Division on IBWC construction projects

Update from Hidalgo County RMA on the 365 project, Regional Mobility Authority (RMA) in Hidalgo County

Meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

** Meeting notes are tentative and summarize in draft the contents and discussion of Citizen Forum meetings.

While these notes are intended to provide a general overview of Citizen's Forum Meetings, they may not necessarily be accurate or complete, and may not be representative of USIBWC policy or positions.