



San Benito's "Safe Box" Shuttered Against the Storm

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Cameron County, Texas

San Benito, TX - "We felt very, very safe. It seemed like we were in a safety deposit box." That's how San Benito Mayor Joe Hernandez describes riding out Hurricane Dolly in his City Hall, Emergency Operations Center – protected by storm shutters.



"We were very grateful for those shutters," Mayor Hernandez added.

On calm days, the almond-colored steel shutters roll up neatly into unobtrusive metal casings above doors and windows. They can be unrolled down to clamp securely over the windows during a storm – such as Hurricane Dolly, which brought winds of more than 55 to 70 miles per hour to San Benito.

"I will never forget that wind and the rain—horizontal rain, for hours and hours. It seemed like it was never going to end," said Martha McClain, San Benito's Community Affairs Officer. McClain was one of a dozen people working in the Emergency Operations Center around the clock for two days during the storm. All around them, Dolly was uprooting trees, tearing roofs apart, and turning debris into airborne missiles.

"I was very grateful that those storm shutters were there during the storm," said McClain. "So much debris was blowing around, big trees coming down. We knew the shutters would prevent missiles coming through the windows and doors. I would not have wanted to be there without them. I remember when our former emergency manager got the grant to install those shutters," McClain said. "He was so proud. And now it paid off."

A few blocks away in this pleasant Rio Grande Valley town of 33,000 people, similar shutters protected the San Benito Public Library. "I wasn't worried about the library at all, because of the shutters," said librarian Cindy Hart.

Besides a broken library shutter on the library, the hurricane winds caused no other damage to the building, which provides services for 60,000 users a year and houses some rare historic records.

"Not having to worry and then not having any damage offsets the cost of the shutters," said Hart. "Officials thought the storm would not be so bad, but I had no electricity at home for three weeks, it seemed pretty bad to me.

"The shutters are very easy to use when it's coming. I can't recommend it enough – people should add shutters," said Hart.

The City Hall shutters were installed in 1997, and the library shutters installed in 2000. Total cost for both buildings was less than \$20,000, of which 75 percent came from a special Federal hurricane protection grant. Hildy Soper, Mitigation Grants Officer, said critical-facility storm shutters are a project eligible for funding through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which is offered Statewide after a Federal disaster declaration.

Hurricane Dolly is "not the first, not the last, and not even the worse storm that will happen in San Benito," said Emergency Manager Orlando Garcia. The community is working to get shutters and generators for other critical public buildings, too, he said.

San Benito is also an evacuation hub for the Rio Grande Valley region that includes Brownsville and Port Isabel, Texas. During Hurricane Dolly, between 700 and 800 evacuees were sheltered in the San Benito high school, according to McClain.

"We have a responsibility to help our region, and we want our community to be prepared. We want to continue taking mitigation measures in advance of a disaster. It would be foolish not to prepare."

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region VI**

State: **Texas**

County: **Cameron County**

City/Community: **San Benito**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

Hazard Type: **Hurricane/Tropical Storm**

Activity/Project Type: **Retrofitting, Structural**

Structure Type: **Masonry, Un-reinforced/Plain**

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/1997**

Activity/Project End Date: **01/2000**

Funding Source: **Other FEMA funds/ US Department of Homeland Security**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **City of San Benito, Texas**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$20,000.00 (Estimated)**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **No**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **1780 , 07/24/2008**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

No URLs were submitted

Main Points

No Main Points were entered.



Cindy Hart in her library protected by storm shutters



Emergency Manager Orlando Garcia cranks open City Hall storm shutters while Mayor Joe Hernandez I