

New Rest Areas Designed with Tornado Safety in Mind

State of Texas: The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is constructing new rest area facilities throughout the state to provide more services and a safer experience for travelers. Not only are the new facilities equipped with surveillance cameras, air-conditioned and heated restrooms, as well as an assisted-use restroom, they have tornado shelters!

“Given the fact we are about safety. We want to entice people to stop, rest and get off the road,” said Stephen Binder, a project manager for the Safety Rest Area Program. “North and West Texas are tornado prone areas. We are about 100 percent safety. Putting tornado shelters in the rest areas in North and West Texas is simply the right thing to do. We don’t place tornado shelters in rest area facilities that are not high risk areas.”

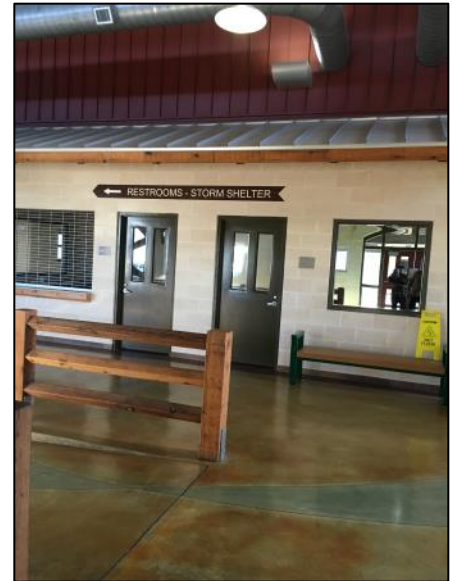
More tornadoes have been recorded in Texas than in any other state, which is partly due to the state's size. An average of 132 tornadoes have been recorded each year. The annual total varies considerably, and certain areas are struck more often than others. Reportedly, tornadoes occur with greatest frequency in the Red River Valley of North Texas. The greatest number of tornadoes recorded in Texas in a single year was 232. The second-highest number in a single year was 223. These occurred in 1967 and 1995, respectively.

Built to guidelines set forth by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the tornado shelters are 13' x 11' and have a capacity of at least 20 people. A surveillance camera is also in place.

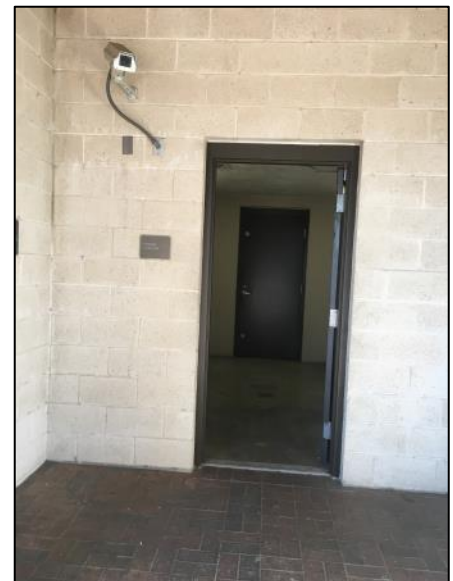
“The design and construction was originally handled by our department because we know what works,” said Binder. “We try to place the rest areas within a 100 miles radius of each other and along both sides of the highway.”

Visitors to the tornado shelters will be pleasantly surprised by the interesting wall plaques depicting historic tornadoes that touched down in the state of Texas along with other additional facts regarding tornado safety. These displays also serve the purpose of deterring folks from simply running into the building and rushing right out. They are encouraged to rest for a moment and stay a while to read the facts.

“We care about people. We like to display graphics. If folks see it, they will most likely remember the shelter,” said Andy Keith, head of the Safety Rest Area Program. “This will also attract them to the other information displays so they will stay around a little longer on their break from driving.”



Lobby of rest area indicating location of storm shelter
Photographer: Bonnie Hanchett/FEMA



Entrance to storm shelter and surveillance
Photographer: Bonnie Hanchett/FEMA

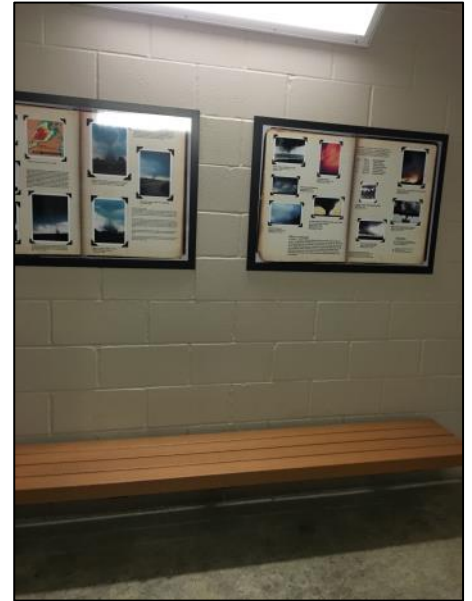


Both Binder and Keith agree that cost of construction for the new facilities varies with each project; however, average cost to build two facilities, one on either side of the highway is approximately \$15 million.

For near-absolute protection from extreme-wind events, follow FEMA's construction guidelines.

The third edition of FEMA P-361, *Safe Rooms for Tornadoes and Hurricanes: Guidance for Community and Residential Safe Rooms*, was released in March 2015. It has the most current guidance on constructing a safe room that provides near-absolute protection from the deadly winds and wind-borne debris associated with extreme-wind events for its occupants. The information presented in FEMA P-361 is the culmination of many years of FEMA-sponsored post-disaster investigations into the performance of safe rooms and storm shelters during tornadoes and hurricanes.

For additional information visit: <https://www.fema.gov/fema-p-361-safe-rooms-tornadoes-and-hurricanes-guidance-community-and-residential-safe-rooms>.



Wall plaques depicting historical tornadoes
Photographer: Bonnie Hanchett/FEMA