

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

With Harvey, heartaches and hardships only beginning

By DAVID PERO
The Daily Astorian

In southeast Texas and southwestern Louisiana, heartaches and hardships are only beginning.

For many, the worst from Hurricane Harvey still awaits. It comes after the rain ends, the flooding recedes and the remnants of the catastrophically destructive storm dissipate. They will experience the overwhelming sense of devastation, desperation and depression when massive cleanup efforts get underway once they are able to return to their homes — or what's left of them — to repair their lives.



Twice in 17 years living there, I had those same feelings after the city I lived in, Beaumont, Texas, was first inundated by large-scale flooding in 1994, and then 11 years later when it was blasted by Hurricane Rita, less than a month after Hurricane Katrina pummeled New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast.

My home was severely damaged each time, but it pales in comparison to the scale of damage Harvey wrought across the same region, and in Houston, about 80 miles west from Beaumont. But in following the reports and watching the destruction, flooding and rooftop rescues, the memories and lessons learned came rushing back. In one of those reports I learned the neighborhood where I lived was under a mandatory evacuation, a sign that damaging flooding was again on the way. By Wednesday afternoon, aerial photos showed my former house nearly completely submerged.

The flood

In the '94 flood, the region experienced about 28 inches of rain over three days, which overflowed the Trinity, San Jacinto and Neches rivers and especially Pine Island Bayou, which stretches about 75 miles from the Texas-Louisiana border near Beaumont westward toward Houston. Water spilled from the bayou's banks and traveled about 7 miles before reaching my home, filling it and all but two others in the neighborhood in varying amounts. At the time, the area was classified as being in a 100-year flood plain, meaning there was only a 1 percent chance of such a severe flood in any given year. As a result, many residents didn't have flood insurance. About 6,000 homes across Beaumont flooded.

My house, on a small rise above the street, took 18 to 20 inches of nasty, brown floodwater inside. Sandbagging didn't help, water always finds a way in, seeping through vents in the brick walls over the three-day period after soaking through the sandbags. During the flooding, I was able to get to the house by boat, docking at my front porch, and could see the damage was heavy inside.

When I returned a day later, the water had receded. It ruined furniture, scarred cabinets, steepled wood floors, saturated carpets and padding and soaked through interior drywall into the insulation. All of that had to be quickly removed, thrown out and replaced, along with personal belongings that didn't make it off the floor or low shelves. Before any rebuilding could begin the house had to be dried out to prevent mold, a distinct challenge in the Texas heat and humidity. Then the empty shell left inside had to be rebuilt with new walls, insulation and flooring. Furniture had to be ordered and purchased while appliances, including the refrigerator, washer and dryer, that took water in low-lying major components had to be replaced. Fortunately, the flooding didn't get into the home's full electrical or the situation would have been much worse. It took nearly six months to complete repairs, all while living inside as it was ongoing.

Rita's wrath

It took even longer — 18 months — for repairs after Rita roared through and uprooted a mature sweetgum tree in my yard that crashed into the roof and caused heavy damage. The hard hit also sent a shock wave through the walls outside and the drywall inside that cracked hard-to-replace blonde brick and split just about every sheetrock seam at all the joints throughout the house. Two other large pine trees also fell, but didn't hit the house, only the fence. Fortunately, there wasn't any water damage. The house was one of 40,000 across the region that sustained significant damage, but many had it far worse.



A flood in 1994 in Beaumont, Texas, swamped Pero's house.

David Pero/The Daily Astorian



The 1994 storm doused the region with 28 inches of rain.

David Pero/The Daily Astorian



The same Beaumont neighborhood this week after Hurricane Harvey.

Submitted Photo



About 6,000 homes in Beaumont flooded in 1994.

David Pero/The Daily Astorian

Rita forced mandatory evacuations and knocked out power for 18 days. I stayed behind and watched it whip in from the protection of the newspaper building, a designated Civil Defense shelter, and lived there throughout the outage with 17 others who helped keep the company operational and the evacuated residents informed via the internet. The storm caused \$1.5 million damage to the three-story building, mostly to its roof.

As a result of Katrina, residential and commercial contractors were scarce and materials even more so, often on back order for months at a time. But having been through it before with the flood, I knew far more what to expect from the scale of the present disaster and the problems it caused.

Despite the hardships that came with both, I consider myself lucky. My experi-

ences are on a far smaller scale than what is happening with Harvey.

Houston and Harvey

To put it somewhat in perspective, Houston is our nation's fourth-largest city. Its population of 6.7 million is roughly 1.5 times greater than the entire state of Oregon, and about 4.25 times the size of New Orleans' pre-Katrina census numbers. Southeast Texas is mostly flat, with meandering bayous, wide rivers and what is known in the South as "gumbo soil," a hard clay-like sand that often tends to retain water more than absorb it. Parts of the area have housing developments built on what used to be rice paddies and crawfish farms.

What's made Harvey so destructive is the double punch it's packed, with damaging wind and historic rainfall. It made landfall as a Category 4 storm, and instead



High water left significant property damage in 1994.

David Pero/The Daily Astorian

of moving inland and dissipating as most storms do, Harvey lingered, reformed and dumped a record of 50 inches of rain or more in some areas causing catastrophic damage.

In comparison, the last two hurricanes to hit that area, Rita in 2005 and Ike in 2008, were each deadly like Harvey and each packed a wallop, but both moved through quickly.

Rita, the stronger of the two, made landfall as a Category 3 storm after approaching the coast as a Category 5 like Katrina. It was a fast-mover and only dropped 16 inches of rain on the region, but it caused tremendous wind damage and spawned as many as 150 tornadoes.

Ike was a giant Category 2 hurricane with severely damaging winds that generated powerful storm surges that caused widespread destruction and flooding in coastal towns, especially Galveston and the nearby Bolivar Peninsula where the combination destroyed nearly all of the peninsula's million-dollar beach homes. Ike is listed as the third costliest storm in U.S. history behind Katrina and Sandy.

Harvey will likely surpass all three — making it the costliest on record. The economic impact will also be felt nationwide. Besides all the physical damage, southeast Texas is home to vast oil refining, and those plants, including the nation's largest, are idled. They represent about a fifth of U.S. oil-refining capacity, which will affect supply and prices.

Recovery

Experts say it will take years for full recovery, much as it has in Katrina's wake.

For those willing to help, some of the earliest needs will be clothing and hygiene items, there will be few places where people can obtain them. Donations to disaster assistance organizations like the American Red Cross, Salvation Army and others also will provide help to those in need.

For those there, the hardships will be at times overwhelming, and a number of people will simply walk away after having had more than enough of Mother Nature.

But like New Orleans, Houston and southeast Texas will recover. The indomitable spirit of people helping people that has been so evident will prevail despite those who try to take advantage of the situation.

They will find they aren't alone, and will rely on each other for help and emotional support to get through it. They will be of purpose and the rest of us can lend a hand in our own ways.

And, like me, the most important lesson they won't forget is there's no greater priority than keeping everyone safe, all the other stuff is just that — stuff, and it can be replaced.

David Pero is the editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian.



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