

EDITOR'S PICK

CENTERPIECE

FEATURED

Four years after Harvey, families in Galveston County continue repairing the damage

By EMMA COLLINS The Daily News
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Ted Tompkins, the operations manager and chaplain at 4B Disaster Response Network, walks through the kitchen of a Hurricane Harvey-damaged house in League City on Friday, Aug. 27, 2021. 4B workers and volunteers have been repairing the house which was flooded in the 2017 storm.

Stuart Villanueva/The Daily News

When Hurricane Harvey hit Dickinson, Suzi Toppin thought she'd be fine.

Toppin had lived in her one-story brick house for more than 20 years. Water had never come close to flooding it, she said.

But when the storm unleashed more than 60 inches of rain on southeast Texas, 4 feet of sewage-tainted flood water invaded her home, forcing Toppin to seek refuge atop her kitchen cabinets.

Harvey left Toppin's house uninhabitable. She and her husband, Bill, were forced to move in with their son in Spring, just north of Houston.

Four years later, the Toppins still live in Spring and still are waiting for their home to finally be repaired.

"It's emotional every time you go down there and you see what little progress has been made and how bad the house still is," Bill Toppin said.

STILL RECOVERING

Four years after Hurricane Harvey hit Galveston County, much of the visible damage has been removed. Mitigation projects and rebuilding continue, however. As cities forge ahead with drainage projects meant to reduce flooding, local groups continue working with residents to rebuild damaged homes.

"We've made progress, but it never moves as fast as you want," Dickinson Mayor Sean Skipworth said.

Hurricane Harvey made landfall in South Texas the night of Aug. 25, 2017, as a category 4 hurricane. It crawled north along the coast, dropping nearly a year's worth of rain in less than a week, according to the National Weather Service. It caused nearly \$125 billion in damage and took 68 lives.

In the years since, the residents and governments in the county have worked to not only rebuild what was lost but also to prevent such destruction from happening again. Those efforts include improving drainage and strengthening city ordinances to ensure anything built after Hurricane Harvey is prepared for the next deluge, John Baumgartner, city manager of League City, said.

They also include rebuilding homes damaged in the hurricane and replacing what many families lost. This work has been supported by multiple nonprofit organizations backed by donations and thousands of volunteers.

And although progress has been made, there is still work to be done.

IN DICKINSON

League City and Dickinson were two of the hardest-hit areas. Many residents were forced to evacuate their damaged homes, while others lost their businesses in the flooding.

In the past four years, both cities have focused extensively on improving the cities' drainage systems.

In Dickinson, where 80 percent of the residents experienced flooding during Harvey, efforts were funded by a \$50 million grant, Skipworth said. The money was part of \$179 million given to the county in May by the Texas General Land Office for flood mitigation projects. In addition to Dickinson, Galveston, Hitchcock, La Marque and Texas City also received funding.

The project will include building two large storm sewer systems to help improve water drainage during floods, according to the land office. The systems will help move water from the bayous within the city out to Dickinson Bayou more quickly, which will allow for faster drainage in the city.

“That would help with large-scale flooding events,” Skipworth said.

But although receiving the grant was a big step, much work remains, Skipworth said. The engineering work will take as many as 14 months before the actual work can begin, he said. The grant also allows seven years for the project to be completed, although the city is hoping to complete it in five, he said. But even with a shorter timeline, it won't be completed until almost a decade after Harvey hit, he said.

“You never recover as quickly as you want to,” he said.

IN LEAGUE CITY

Similar work is happening in nearby League City. But unlike Dickinson, much of the work in League City is funded by a \$145 million general obligation bond that was passed by voters in 2019, Baumgartner said.

After Harvey, the city contracted professional engineering consultants to assess the hardest-hit neighborhoods, Baumgartner said. Thirty-one projects were identified, 21 of which focused on flood protection and drainage improvements.

The city has made progress on those projects, with some under construction and others in the design and land acquisition phases, Angie Steelman, director of budget and project management, said. There also are some grant-funded projects underway, she said.

“We’re making improvements,” she said. “Hopefully, we just never face another Harvey.”

League City also is part of a group of cities, including Pearland and Friendswood, that participated in a study of the Clear Creek and Dickinson Bayou watersheds, Baumgartner said. The project looked for ways to reduce flooding during heavy rain.

The study was recently completed, and projects totaling hundreds of millions of dollars were identified, he said. The projects need to be further refined to see the total cost before work can begin, but they are expected to reduce serious flooding, he said.

AROUND THE COUNTY

But the remaining work isn’t confined to government projects. Hundreds of people like the Toppins around the county are still waiting for repairs of varying levels of damage caused by the flooding, John Eckeberger, executive director for the 4B Disaster Response Network, said.

The group has helped get 473 homes back to pre-Harvey conditions. But Eckeberger estimated at least 500 more needed repair.

“We’re coming across people every month,” he said. “Someone says, ‘Oh, I know someone who had Harvey damage, and they didn’t know who to turn to.’”

Most of the damage is inside houses, which creates the impression that all of the Harvey damage to homes has been repaired, Ted Tompkins, operations manager with the 4B group, said.

“A lot of times, people are driving by and look at the outside of a home and think, ‘Oh, what a nice house,’” he said. “But they don’t see the damage inside the house.”

HABITABLE, NOT WHOLE

Galveston County Recovers Long Term Recovery Group also is restoring homes in the area. The list for people waiting for repairs has a couple hundred families, Executive Director Lynda Perez said. Many of the remaining homes are habitable but still in need of repair, she said.

“Many of them who are elderly and in less than great health are living in places that are really not safe or sanitary for them to be in,” she said. “But they’re in them because they’ve got nowhere else to go.”

Some people whose homes were damaged were eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency aid, but that money didn’t always cover everything, Perez said. Some also were eligible for assistance through the land office, but that money also didn’t always pay to rebuild houses back to their original conditions, she said. Others had homeowner’s insurance that may have helped out some, she said.

“It’s more difficult than a lot of people understand,” she said.

Both groups rely on donations and volunteers, and both wish they could move faster.

“I wish we could move at a fast pace,” Eckeberger said. “But I realize there are limitations to what we can do.”

A LONG PROCESS

The four years since Hurricane Harvey have been a series of ups and downs for the Toppins. After the hurricane, Bill Toppin sent applications to every recovery group he could find. The couple received money from FEMA and a loan from the Small Business Administration.

“Every time I saw one on Facebook or wherever, I filled out an application,” he said.

The land office offered to help the couple by tearing down the house and rebuilding it at half the size, but the couple turned down that offer.

“That would have doubled our losses,” Bill Toppin said.

‘RAY OF HOPE’

The Toppins eventually paid a company to send out a contractor to work on their house, but the contractor ended up stealing money from them and doing substandard work, Bill Toppin said. The Toppins have a lawsuit against both the company and the contractor.

At one point, there was even a squatter living in the house, they said.

But earlier this year, things changed. The Galveston Recovery Group reached out to the Toppins about starting work on the house. Their name had been on the list for four years.

“It’s definitely a ray of hope that after four years, they haven’t forgotten us,” Bill Toppin said.

The group plans to bring volunteers October, COVID-permitting. And now, the Toppins are starting to imagine they might finally go home.

“It’s like the sun has come out behind the clouds,” Suzi Toppin said. “We’re hopeful, but we don’t know what to expect.”

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