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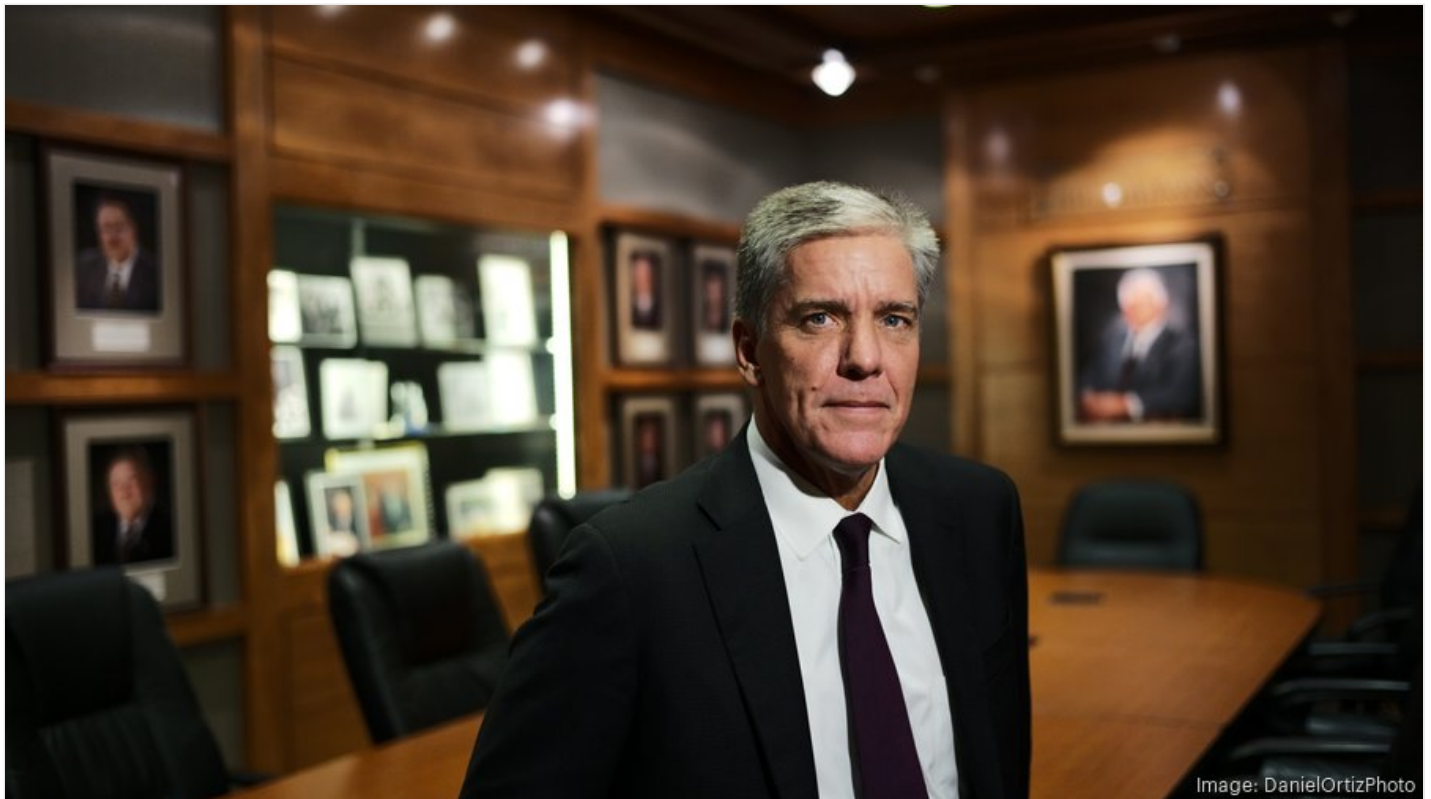
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Hurricane Harvey: One year later

One year after Harvey, Houston leaders working to secure Harvey funds and change policies



Marvin Odum, chief recovery officer for the city of Houston.

HBJ/DANIEL ORTIZ



By **Cara Smith** – Reporter, Houston Business Journal
Aug 16, 2018

In the six nights during and after Hurricane Harvey, Ed Emmett slept on a canvas cot in an office far more cramped than the one he calls home in downtown Houston.

As director of Harris County’s Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, as well as Harris County Judge, Emmett oversaw the county’s immediate reaction and deployment of aid from its Emergency Operations Center in west Houston. He saw the center - filled with wall-to-wall TV monitors, LED displays and workstations for nearly 100 people - become “fully activated,” as Emmett put it. In the throes of the storm, nearly 500 city and county personnel, emergency responders and outside nonprofit leaders filled the facility to its max capacity.

“They’re really good at what they do,” Emmett said of the county’s emergency response staff. “But then, beginning on Saturday, it was all hell breaking loose.”

On Saturday, **the Arkema chemical plant in Crosby blew up**. The first wave of Harvey’s flooding hit later that night. Volunteers were driving trucks provided by UPS, Jim “Mattress Mack” McIngvale and METRO. Over the course of the next three days, nearly 160,000 Harris County homes flooded and an estimated \$125 billion in damage across the state, per data from the National Hurricane Center.

That was one year ago.



Harris County Judge Ed Emmett in his downtown Houston office.

CARA SMITH/HBJ

Since then, city and county officials have dedicated flights to D.C., trips to Austin and plenty of late nights to starting the gargantuan task of Houston's recovery. One such group of officials is the city of Houston's recovery office, which is being led by Marvin Odum, Houston's chief recovery officer and the former president of Houston-based Shell Oil Co. To date, the recovery office, working in tandem with other city and county officials, have secured roughly \$10 billion in federal aid.

Here's a breakdown of those funds: around \$4.5 billion in funds from the National Flood Insurance Program, the Small Business Association and FEMA has already hit the ground in Houston, Odum said. Another \$2 billion or \$3 billion from FEMA is anticipated for repairs to Houston's buildings, bridges and public infrastructure. A little over \$1.1 billion from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is coming to Houston, too, and the city will have local control over those funds. An additional \$5 billion has been allocated from HUD to Texas, but it's unclear how much Houston will receive from that fund.

It'll be years, if not a decade, before all the funds are spent. It's also worth considering that City of Houston regulations **don't apply in unincorporated Harris County**, where 1.8

million people live, according to Harris County officials.



JAMES MILBRANDT/HBJ

“Every dollar that gets spent by the city as part of this recovery gets scrutinized and audited for decades,” Odum said. “So, you get the money but you better treat it right, spend it the right way and keep the right records. Otherwise, you give it back.”

The city’s recovery office also worked to approve a new pilot program through FEMA that could save Houston hundreds of millions of dollars.

FEMA has allocated between \$2 billion to \$3 billion for Houston, but there’s a catch - Houston’s required to match 10 percent of those funds locally, meaning that Houston will have to dedicate between \$200 million and \$300 million to repair city infrastructure. The city’s rainy day fund was emptied within the first week after Harvey hit, city officials said. The money simply wasn’t there.

“We were sitting here in December (and) saying, ‘OK, this match is a real problem,’” Odum said.

So, the members of Houston’s recovery office got on a flight to D.C. to meet with FEMA officials. Their pitch was simple enough: Instead of Houston matching FEMA’s donations

with cash, could the city contribute the 10 percent match requirement through volunteer hours and pro-bono work?

“I don’t want to give the impression that it was easy, but I want to be fair to FEMA. They recognized it as a good idea,” Odum said. “They did the exact right thing.”

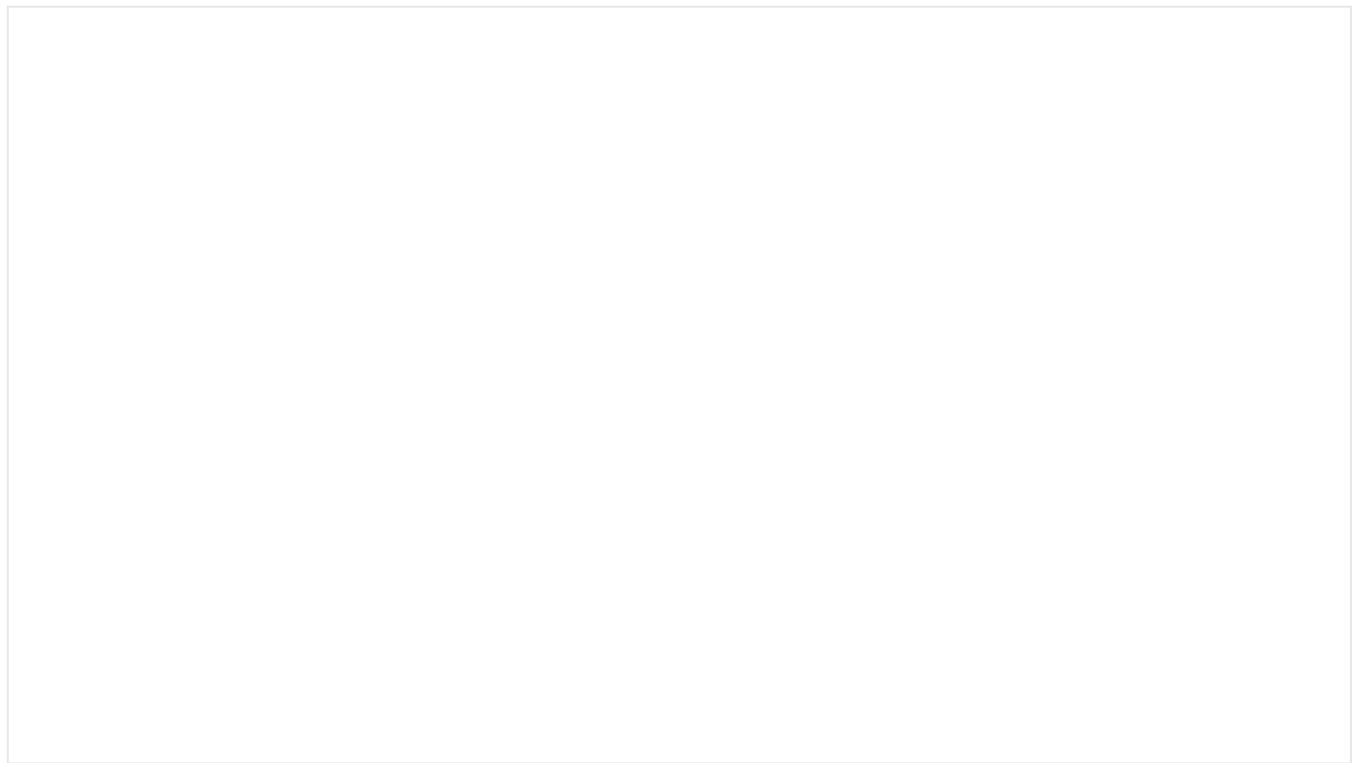
When the program’s rolled out, city officials are hoping to work with workers of all skill levels - and billing rates - to work toward the match requirement. It’s a multibillion-dollar recovery project, so there will surely be need for lawyers, designers, accountants and other workers whose services are worth a steep market value.

“Ideally, we’ll do it in a way that is a call to action for all those around the city who can actually contribute to this,” Odum said.

The public’s involvement with Houston’s recovery has exceeded what you’d expect - Houston has seen large donations from the city’s biggest companies, personalities and businesspeople, as well as countless volunteer hours contributed by the city’s business community.

“They understand we cannot continue to be seen as a flood-prone area for commercial interests,” Emmett said of the city’s private sector. “Companies aren’t going to come here if they look up every other year and Houston’s underwater.”

But, there have also been some pieces of the recovery lost in translation. **The public outcry for a third reservoir** - the current two being Addicks and Barker reservoirs - has grown more robust following Hurricane Harvey, and for understandable reasons: the third reservoir could prevent floodwaters from draining into Buffalo Bayou. Proponents say it should be built to protect the Cypress Creek area, which suffered significant flooding during Harvey.



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released a site plan in 2015 that showed where a potential third reservoir in the Houston area might be.

HBJ VIA U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS MAP

Odum, as well as many public officials, see a third reservoir - a roughly \$500 million undertaking - as a logical and necessary part of Houston's recovery. But the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are currently leading the study on the feasibility of a third reservoir, and that study is expected to conclude at least three years from now, said Annie Pope, policy advisor in the City of Houston's Mayor's Office.

The Army Corps of Engineers didn't return request for comment. In the meantime, Odum said that many of the city and county repairs are effective in their own rights, but are part of a broader repair effort that's still in the feasibility, planning and approval processes.

"They're in full recognition that nothing fixes the big picture until you get the infrastructure in place," Odum said.

Niel Golightly, chief of staff in the city's recovery office, said Harvey may be bringing about a transformational moment for Houston, its stakeholders and its residents.

“Within recent living history, there have been two or three transformational points that (changed) how the city thought about its challenges,” Golightly said. “Is this another one of those transformational points where people say, ‘Wait a minute - we need to think differently about development?’ ... Only history will prove that.”