

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Jeff Braun**

Interview Date: 10/13/2014

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Bob Gaffney

Location: Part of a series on the history of the building at 307
Fort Street, Richmond, Texas, currently the Office of
Emergency Management

9 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: I'm interviewing Jeff Braun with the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management at 307 Fort Street, Richmond, Texas 77478, on "How Government Works". Will you tell us how the Office of Emergency Management works.



Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management, 307 Fort Street, Richmond, Texas

BRAUN: I am Jeff Braun and I am the Emergency Management Coordinator for Fort Bend County. We prepare the county for when disasters strikes. My boss is the County Judge, Robert Hebert. By state law he is the person that ultimately has responsibility for emergency management in Fort Bend County.

State law indicates that the mayor of a city or the judge of a county has basically the same powers of the governor once a disaster is declared in a jurisdiction. In situations like Hurricane Ike or Hurricane Rita, a disaster is declared by the judge and if the disaster extends over a period of more than seven days it needs to be ratified after the fact by the entire commissioners court.

The Emergency Management Coordinator is a position appointed by the County Judge. Other County department heads are either elected officials who run their own office, like the sheriff or the County Treasurer, or they're appointed by the entire commissioners court such as the Human Resources Director or the Director of Health and Human Services. Unlike those positions, the county judge appoints the Emergency Management Coordinator.

I was appointed in December of 2003 so it's been slightly more than ten years. The Office of Emergency Management is given the responsibility of trying to coordinate how the county prepares, responds, recovers, and mitigates from an emergency. The staff and the workload is designed to do something to foster one of those four efforts.

The first area is **preparedness**, the idea being that the community or individual that is prepared is going to have fewer needs when the disaster comes. We conduct preparedness outreach meetings and have a lot of preparedness material that we disseminate in person and on our website. We use pretty much any tool we can to get the word out about how individuals should prepare for an emergency.

Because we are in the Texas gulf coast area, we focus a lot on hurricanes. But in 2009 we had the H1N1 event. People thought it might turn out worse than it did. Right now we're dealing with what could be issues related to Ebola. A big part of what we do in emergency management is coordinating and collaborating with other agencies, such as the county's Health and Human Services Department to make sure that we have all the resources to meet the needs of the community.

Response is the next focus area. In the movies there are way more of those people than there are in real life in an OEM office. When I started in December 2003, we had three full-time positions in emergency management and two part-time positions. At this point, ten years later, we have six positions in the budget. Three of those are professional emergency managers and three of them are clerical staff. We also have six other individuals that work in our office who are paid with Federal grant money from the Department of Homeland Security. That evolved out of the tragedy of 9-11. The national government has focused on trying to make sure that state and local governments have resources they need to deal with preventing and protecting the homeland from a disaster, especially a man-made disaster like terrorism, which is different than a natural disaster like a hurricane or a tornado. The effort has been funded with grant funds to make sure that certain national policies are put in place at the local level. If an office of emergency management does certain things they can get great money for staffing or equipment.

Getting back to the response issue, we are not first responders. When there's something bad happening in the community the main way we respond is gearing up our Emergency Operations Center, which is located in this building (in downtown Richmond at 307 Fort Street). At that point in time, we bring people from a lot of different agencies to help coordinate the response effort. But we are not in the field like a firefighter or a police officer, or an Emergency Medical Technician. Our job is to make sure that they have all the information and resources that they need so they can get their job done efficiently. We gather information so we can provide our bosses, whether they be mayors or county judges or commissioners, with information which allows them to make good policy decisions such as a need for a curfew or if we need to purchase more sandbags. We have 16 different jurisdictions and each of them could have different things going on. Some may need a lot of response, some of them may not need any at all.

The Emergency Operations Center is formed to get the information and gain situational awareness. Then when first responders run out of a particular resource we try to assist. Say they need more law enforcement officers and they don't have any more in their police department, they can ask the county. If we can supply them, we will. If we can't then we're going to have to request that from the next level of government, which is the state. There could be needs for law enforcement officers, water, Meals-Ready-to-Eat, ice, or transportation. It could be buses to help evacuate people out of a flood zone. Our job is to support the efforts of those who are out in the field. Obviously when you request resources from farther away, it takes longer for them to get there.

GOODSILL: Do you tell the media what's going on or does somebody else do that?

BRAUN: If we're activated during a response, we have a Public Information Officer (PIO) as part of our team. That person is responsible for getting the word out about what the citizens need to know. In most cases the County Judge that would actually perform that duty. That's what Judge Hebert did during Hurricane Ike. He had a lot of discussions with newspaper reporters on air. We also have our own 1670AM radio station, which is run out of this building. The Judge recorded fifteen to twenty messages, especially as we got into the debris removal period, on what was important for people to know. On the other hand, if he's not in the EOC, that may be handled by myself or my deputy or the Public Information Officer.

Now, if we get into a terrible situation like a couple of improvised explosive devices go off at a mall or the commissioners court building we'd have multiple jurisdictions involved. In that case we might set up a Joint Information Center (JIC). We might do that in this building or at a different facility. The idea is that all the agencies that are affected would come together and develop one message about what is going on so that citizens aren't hearing different messages. Public Information working with the news media is a very important aspect of what we do. That's an overview of the response activity, heavy on activating the EOC, heavy on getting information from and to our partners, gaining situational awareness, and gaining resources for our first responders that they are out in the community.

The next phase that we work on is **recovery**. Disaster recovery involves trying to put everything back together the way it was before the emergency event took place. A lot of times when somebody asks me what we do in emergency management, I'll show them a picture of what Fort Bend County looks like on a normal day and I'll say, "Look at the picture," and they'll look at it. Then I'll say, "The goal is to always look at this, with people going to church, to work, driving down the freeway, playing baseball, and going to band practice. The issue is that during an emergency some of those things stop happening. People aren't shopping, they aren't going to work, they can't go to school, or they have to go at different hours." We want to return to normal as quickly as possible and that's what recovery involves.

Recovery is an interesting part of our job. Once again it gets back to collaboration, coordination, and communication. A lot of what happens in the United States in terms of recovery actually happens from non-governmental agencies like the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and the food banks.

There are a lot of organizations within Fort Bend County and within the Houston region that work on a daily basis to help people who are in need. They become even more in need during a desperate event like a hurricane. Those in need don't necessarily have all the things that we preach about preparedness for preparedness planning, a kit with food and water. Some people can't actually purchase all those things at one time and have them sitting in their house waiting for a disaster.

The non-profit community is best suited to meet this need. Fort Bend Corps may help fix somebody's roof that might have been ripped off during Hurricane Ike. The jurisdiction may need a point of distribution set up because they don't have electricity and need water and ice because the water system is shut down and refrigerators have stopped working.

One of the things the government can do is set up a point of distribution. The city can do that but they don't always have the manpower so they can use volunteers and non-profit groups can supply that.

After Hurricane Katrina, close to 2,000 people were in hotels in Fort Bend County. Many of them were evacuees from New Orleans and here comes this other storm, Rita, and all of a sudden Fort Bend County was in the target area for Hurricane Rita. As citizens tried to protect homes and businesses in Fort Bend, all the gas stations, convenience stores, and food stores shut down. There were no restaurants or convenience stores open and there were no stores to get something like diapers. We didn't know how long the situation was going to last. We were getting ready for the landfall of the hurricane. Worked almost like a public/nonprofit partnership with several agencies, including Richmond-Rosenberg's Helping Hands organization. They opened their pantry and we came up with a schedule and took our county vehicles to all the hotels and provided some food, water, diapers, and some of the basics. It shows how important it is to have the whole community involved. The nonprofit community plays a big role in disaster recovery. We go to a lot of nonprofit fairs and outreach events to try to spread the word about what emergency management is and how people can prepare so they can be safer in a disaster.

A couple of years ago we developed a partnership we named the Community Partners In Preparedness, or CPIP. We try to have continuous communication with these groups so we don't lose the message. As a matter of fact, we had emergency preparedness event training at the Mamie George Community Center, which is a facility in north Richmond that's run by Catholic Charities. It was held as a combined effort to try get the right message to the right people in the right area instead of always having it at the Office of Emergency Management or the Sheriff's Office. That's an overview of recovery.

The last of the four topics is **mitigation**. It always seems to be the last of all the topics but I could make the case that it should be the first of all the topics. What happens in mitigation is we try to identify the hazards in our community and try to improve the situation so that we won't have a problem during an event. New Orleans, for example, would be building better levees after Hurricane Katrina and buying bigger pumps and making sure the pumps have redundant power on them so that they will never go out. In the northwest part of our community, the City of Simonton is right on the Brazos River.

They've traditionally had flooding problems from the Brazos River when it becomes supercharged with water from rains from the northern part of the state. Over the years their city has spent money and worked with the county Roads and Bridges Department to develop systems that could keep water out of their community by pumping water out and keep the river from going into certain river streams.

The talk from the county Office of Emergency Management is that we develop a countywide hazard mitigation plan. The plan outlines what actions the County and cities can take so that we can lessen disasters from happening in the future. Our hazard mitigation plan is a countywide effort.

GOODSILL: Is it up to the cities to implement them or is it the county that funds it?

BRAUN: It's possible for an individual jurisdiction to have their own hazard mitigation plan. The City of Austin Texas might have their own. I think the City of Katy and the City of Sugar Land have their own hazard mitigation plans. What we have for the remainder of Fort Bend County is a hazard mitigation plan that has been signed by all sixteen jurisdictions. There's a basic plan that contains appendices for each jurisdiction. Everyone has their own plan within which there are projects that hopefully help to reduce the threat from future disasters.

GOODSILL: What if it's in the plan but the city budget doesn't accommodate it?

BRAUN: Well, that is an issue of the democratic system we live in. Emergency management is a very small department within any jurisdiction. In Fort Bend County, our budget is about a half-million dollars. I think the county's budget is \$250 million. \$100,000 of the \$500,000 is reimbursement to the federal government based on an emergency management program. There are some grants available and the county can work with the jurisdictions as necessary to help them achieve some of those grants.

The county has its own mitigation projects that we work on, such as big drainage improvements. The number one hazard that we have in the county is problems resulting from heavy rainfall and storms and flooding. A lot of rain all at one time floods roadways or a neighborhood or subdivision and causes problems. It is about coordination and making sure that we have the knowledge and understanding of what needs to take place so our elected officials can make good decisions for the community. They have to weigh what those projects are against whatever projects might be coming from the Sheriff's Office or from the Health Department, or from the employees.

GOODSILL: Maybe also it's the nature of the business that you're everybody's best friend when there's emergency but when there's not an emergency...

BRAUN: True. Recently I was part of a panel discussion where we were talking about levee issues. We have ninety-nine miles of levees in Fort Bend County that protect development from the Brazos River. That protects almost \$16 to \$18 billion worth of land and property within our community. We have twenty levee districts and each of the levee districts is a political subdivision in and of itself. So you can add that on to the amount of jurisdictions we have, too. They have taxing ability and they tax citizens to get money and maintain and operate levees. There were four people on the panel. I didn't get asked a question and it was getting close to the end of the time. The moderator kept saying, "Don't worry, Jeff, we'll get to you." To your point, it's a small department easily overlooked until something drastic happens.

Right now the Ebola situation may be more on the health side than emergency management. Everybody's asking, "Why weren't we doing this and why weren't we doing that?" Well, part of it is that there are not a lot of people in emergency management in general and when things are good, people don't really want to discuss disasters. I've seen a slide presentation that shows a picture of what it will look like in your community the day before a hurricane. It's the prettiest picture of the blue sky that you've ever seen. The day after, the buildings are collapsed. It's hard to get people to think about the possibilities of a disaster when the skies are nice. It's called The Blue Sky Effect.

When I started in December 2003 we had between 300,000 and 325,000 citizens in Fort Bend County. I just went to a symposium last week and the estimate right now is 680,000 citizens. So growth has been tremendous. It means more people are potentially vulnerable, including those who have some type of functional need that means they have trouble living independently.

They may have trouble because they don't have transportation. It could be somebody who has a disability. It could mean somebody who doesn't speak English as a first language. The last time I heard, we had sixty-eight different languages and dialects spoken in Fort Bend County. So when we're trying to send out emergency messages, it's too easy to say we'll just say it all in English. We're trying, as much as we can, to incorporate our preparedness information into different languages.

One important aspect I should point out is that Fort Bend County is part of the Houston-Galveston Area Council and as such, there are thirteen counties in the Houston area that work together on emergency management. The Houston Urban Area Initiative was formed as a result of Homeland Security grants from the federal government for Fort Bend County, Montgomery County, Harris County, Galveston County, Brazoria County, and the City of Houston. We are responsible to spend the monies that we get from Homeland Security on those types of activities that will help prevent and protect us from terrorism. But a lot of the resources we need to prevent and protect us from terrorism are the same resources to protect us from and help us recover from a tornado or a hurricane or a biological threat. Since about 2003 the county has probably received about \$25 million of Homeland Security funds that have been used for a variety of projects. Harris County and the City of Houston are the big jurisdictions so they get the bulk of the money. But we've gotten money to improve our capability to do the things that we've talked about today, which is to prepare, respond, recover, and mitigate from potential disasters.

GOODSILL: Thank you for the overview, Jeff.

Interview Ends