



NEWS Release

City of Rockport · 2751 H 35 Bypass · Rockport, Texas 78382 · (361) 729-2213

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CONTACT: KEVIN CARRUTH, CITY MANAGER
PHONE: (361) 729-2213 x221

ROCKPORT RECEIVES “EXCELLENCE AWARD”

ROCKPORT, TX – The City of Rockport was named the winner of the Texas Municipal League’s “Municipal Excellence Award for Communications Programs” at the association’s annual meeting in Fort Worth. According to Deputy Executive Director Rachel Pitts, the judges were very impressed with the City’s entry – *Sustaining Communication Before and After a Disaster*.

Formed in 1913, the Texas Municipal League’s (TML) mission is to serve the needs and advocate for the interests of Texas cities. This includes, but is not limited to legal guidance, legislative issues at the state and federal levels, and training.

Today TML represents more than 1,158 cities with populations ranging from under 5,000 to over 100,000. Over 16,000 mayors, councilmembers, city managers, city attorneys, and city department heads are member officials of the League by virtue of their cities' participation.

“It was truly an honor to be recognized by TML,” noted Rockport Mayor Pat Rios. “Our staff did an incredible job of overcoming major obstacles to ensure that our citizens were informed of all aspects of relief to recovery associated with Hurricane Harvey.

“They truly went above and beyond what was expected of them. We are so proud that they were honored with this recognition,” he’ added.

TML Communication Award – submitted June 1, 2018

Title – Sustaining Communication Before and After a Disaster

Population: 10,000

Brief Project Summary

Rockport's Emergency Management Plan was set in motion when tropical storm Harvey intensified into a Category 4 hurricane in less than 36 hours. An agreement with the City of Bastrop, Texas allowed the City to set up a satellite communication office in the public library and house its servers. From there, a handful of employees responded to direct calls from residents, the media, and volunteers/donors; communicated directly with elected officials and other City employees in the Emergency Operation Center (EOC); and broadcast news, disaster relief information and vital contacts through the City's website and social media for more than two weeks during the initial relief period.

Now out of the response phase and into recovery, the City is still actively posting on social media, its website, and through news releases and quarterly newsletter. Additionally, the City has been at the forefront of community education through seminars, focus groups, and open meetings.

It's ironic that the submission deadline is the start of the next hurricane season.

Project Description (1,200 words or less)

The meteorologists called Hurricane Harvey a "one of a kind" hurricane. The storm destroyed or severely damaged 35 percent of the structures and knocked out water, sewer, and electric service for two weeks. In addition, depending upon your provider and location, cellular and landline telephone service were out for several weeks. Consequently, communication between the City of Rockport and its citizens was a critical missing link in the early response phase of the emergency. Rockport, however, did have avenues to attack the problem.

First, despite a scant 36-hour warning, the City was able to successfully mobilize its staff to prepare for the onslaught. Personnel essential to relief and safety were onsite at the joint Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and the City's Service Center, both built to withstand hurricane force winds. Another group of employees representing the City Secretary's office, IT, Utility Billing and Community Relations established a satellite office the Bastrop's public library, located more than three hours away.

Most of the City's phones, applications, and data were already hosted in the cloud in anticipation of evacuation for a storm. In addition, the IT Department transported the City's servers to Bastrop so that, together with the cloud hosted applications, individuals calling into the City's regular published main number could seamlessly talk to a representative in Bastrop and City employees could access the applications and data they needed to continue operations.

Second, due to obstacles hindering the EOC (e.g. loss of power, cellular service and no website), the City took the initiative to post timely information on its website within hours of the hurricane hitting land in Rockport. This included everything from reminders of the evacuation

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order; contact information for disaster relief, insurance, and shelter; and updates on utility resumption.

Third, anticipating the landline telephones, cellular telephone, and Internet services would all be out of services, the City made pre-storm arrangements with its cellular provider to have two SatCoWs (satellite cellular on wheels) on standby for immediate deployment as soon as the storm passed by. These satellite trucks provided staff with limited telephone and Internet access in the first several days following the storm.

Fourth, by the second day, the City employed a “Message from the Mayor” that incorporated this information, activities coming out of the EOC and relief efforts from state and federal entities. Additionally, the message was shared with locally-based social media sites.

The Mayor’s Message ran nightly from September 27 – October 3. It was then released in conjunction with the Disaster Recovery meetings and continues to this day. As of June 1, there have been 82 “Messages from the Mayor,” over a period of 278 days, and subsequent posting on 20 social media sites totaling over 82,000 impressions. Social media sites continue to be monitored to correct any misinformation posted by users and respond to queries for assistance.

Fifth, to ensure that vital information was being shared with regional and national media, the Mayor temporarily relocated to San Antonio to respond to said calls. All media inquiries to the City’s satellite office, EOC, and senior staff’s emails and cellphones were shared with him to guarantee timely response. As a result, the Mayor served as a representative voice for the area and allowed Rockport-based staff to focus on preparation and response.

As the “voice,” the Mayor was able to share information from the entities that comprised the EOC (Aransas County, City of Rockport and Town of Fulton emergency management personnel and elected officials); the numerous state and federal emergency divisions; outside relief agencies; and then the subsequent agencies participating in the recovery process. Additionally, the regular messages served as a positive reminder to residents that efforts and activities were underway – with a regular sign-off of “It’s getting better every day.” With Mayor Wax’s retirement and Mayor Rios taking the helm, the message has changed to an upbeat, recovery mode – “Rebuilding a *better* Rockport.”

Sixth, while still in the recovery mode, the City Manager’s office reached out to a major advertising agency to assist in developing a signature statement prior to entering the recovery and rebuilding modes. An iconic statue located on the grounds of the Rockport Center for the Arts was selected as a phoenix-like image for the tagline “Rockport Rising.” (The statue survived, but the Art Center building was too compromised and has been torn down.) Tee shirts and bumper stickers were produced (at no charge) to the City and the image was added to the website.

Seventh, prior to the hurricane, the City’s website had shared basic information on hurricane preparation, including signing up for emergency notification. Immediately following the

hurricane, we noted that many residents didn't know what to do or how to proceed. Today, the website is a comprehensive source for all hurricane-related activity from planning, evacuation, relief contacts, and return. This information is being promoted via news release, Mayor's

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message, and an informational hurricane preparation breakfast on June 1 at the City's Service Center.

Lastly, the City has worked closely with local and state entities to provide information on all aspects of recovery. This includes public forums for downtown recovery and economic revitalization, Town Hall meetings, clean-up efforts, coastal resiliency, employment and housing fairs, and the development of a communication strategy for the Disaster Recovery Team.

Singular examples include:

* Fortified Home Workshop - in conjunction with the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) for homeowners, contractors, building and code officials, and other interested parties. Created by IBHS, FORTIFIED Home™ is a set of engineering and building standards designed to help improve resiliency and strengthen new and existing homes through system-specific building upgrades to minimum building code requirements that will reduce damage from specific natural hazards, including hurricanes, high winds, and hail.

*Tree Recovery – in conjunction with Texas A&M Forest Service. Discuss recommended tree species for Aransas County and the proper planting and care of trees. Followed by planting donated trees in three Rockport parks that experienced severe damage. Additionally, the City coordinated a free plant giveaway for Aransas County residents with Texas Roots, a non-profit organization.

*Funding Reconstruction - workshops on rebuilding, floodproofing, and federal grant funding through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for property owners in flood zones. This grant can help property owners fund reconstruction projects that will be compliant with City building codes and floodplain regulations.