

*A Conversation with Judge Ed Emmett*

## Harris County Faces Challenges Following Hurricane Harvey Deluge

*Edward M. Emmett became Harris County judge in 2007. He is the chief administrative officer and director of emergency management in the county, which includes most of the city of Houston. He recently released a 15-point plan to prevent future flooding disasters. Harris County is the third-most populous U.S. county, accounting for two-thirds of the Houston metropolitan statistical area's population of 6.8 million people.*

### **Q. How did Hurricane Harvey's aftermath compare to previous severe weather events in the region?**

There is no comparison—Harvey is by far the worst storm to hit Harris County. Unlike past events such as Hurricane Ike, Harvey was a rain and flooding event that affected a much greater number of people and businesses.

Over 50 inches of rain fell in parts of the county; there is very little you can do to prepare for that amount of rain in a short period of time. With a hurricane, there is a storm surge that is localized and more predictable, which allows you to better prepare and evacuate people. What many people don't understand is that Harris County has good drainage—that's why most of the water was gone within a week. It was just too much rain in a very short period of time, and for homeowners, it has been a much more difficult event to deal with than businesses since homeowners don't have the resources to rebuild. Going forward, the biggest challenge is finding the money to rebuild and beef up infrastructure to reduce the impact of the next big flood.

### **Q. What do you see as key differences in the response to Harvey compared with Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Katrina?**

Katrina was a game changer in terms of how large a political event it was and how governmental entities reacted in the aftermath. There was a lot of criticism of federal, state and local governments. What a lot of people remember is the disjointed response.

By the time I had become county judge in 2007, the precedent had already been set in our region that during these kinds of crises, the city, county and state need to work together. We don't get caught up in who is in charge of what, we simply do what needs to be done to make sure everyone is safe.

Hurricanes didn't used to be political events. As an example, I was in the Houston area when Hurricane Alicia hit us in 1983, and it wasn't an event that came into the political realm. Nobody talked about the government's response or how FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) managed the aftermath. That first changed with the politicization of Hurricane Andrew [in South Florida] in 1992—an election

year—when President [George H.W.] Bush was judged by how he responded. Since then, these storms have become political in the sense that the response to the event is judged and used as ammunition in the next election cycle.

### **Q. Businesses have told us that Harvey did not cause as much business disruption as it did residential disruption. How does this impact the recovery?**

Businesses have the resources to start the repairs right away, and most were back on their feet relatively quickly. Even a small restaurant I know of in Meyerland, one of the hardest-hit areas in the county, took on five feet of water but was back in operation within three weeks. Once the water was gone, businesses had the wherewithal to begin rebuilding and get back into operation.

The issue with homeowners is that most people have a significant money shortage and don't have the funds to rebuild. Many homeowners were not insured, and even those who were are waiting a long time for FEMA to send them checks. Even then, often the amount received doesn't cover the cost to rebuild. So, many have been left waiting for additional aid or hoping for a buyout.

### **Q. What do you see as the most important points of your recently announced flood control proposal? What are the biggest challenges?**

The most important element of the plan is the overall vision. We need to acknowledge that we live in a flood-prone area and take action to reduce the impacts of future floods. Rather than fighting with our watersheds, we need to use them as assets and turn as many of them as possible into recreational areas and green spaces. It is a different kind of mindset that we need to adopt.

Beyond that, we need to recognize that lakes Houston and Conroe need to be designated as flood-control lakes rather than water supplies. We need to change our thinking and think of everything as a flood-control effort.



▶ *If people have been allowed to build in flood-prone areas, where they really shouldn't have built, we need to buy them out so that we don't keep paying out insurance.*

The biggest challenge is finding the money. The federal dollars will flow sooner or later, but they won't be enough. Everyone agrees we need a third reservoir on the west side, but the estimated cost is \$500 million. With just 5 percent of the rainy-day fund [the Texas Economic Stabilization Fund] balance, the state could cover the cost and protect a huge number of Texas residents without waiting for federal funding.

An important use of funds would be to buy out homes in true flood plains. If people have been allowed to build in flood-prone areas, where they really shouldn't have built, we need to buy them out so that we don't keep paying out insurance.

**Q. How does the governmental structure of the region impact its infrastructure planning to prevent damage during future severe weather?**

We need a long-term revenue source that encompasses unincorporated Harris County to finance these infrastructure projects.

A huge number of people live outside of incorporated areas of Harris County. Compared with Dallas County, where there are about 6,000 people in unincorporated areas, there are almost 2 million in Harris County—nearly the same as the city of Houston's population. We have more than 1,000 different municipal utility districts in Harris County. Because of (state) legislation, the city of Houston can't annex these areas. So, we have an area with a growing urban population that expects the same services as the city but limited avenues for obtaining revenue to provide them.

At the county level, we only have access to property taxes and not sales taxes. There is a lot of pressure at the

state level to not only keep property taxes from increasing but to reduce them. The county government is an arm of the state—we can only do what the state tells us to do. But this pressure to maintain services, including flood control to a large and growing population, while at the same time facing cuts to our revenues makes it a difficult balance.

A state Senate bill considered in the last legislative session proposed restricting county revenue to the pace of population growth and inflation. While this might sound good, this doesn't realistically work for a place like Harris County where most of the growth is in unincorporated areas. On top of that, the county government's responsibilities include indigent health care, criminal justice, roads and bridges, and flood control, which aren't well-tied to any measures of inflation that I know of.

Ultimately, we need some way to find a more sustainable source of revenue, such as sales taxes, to help fund some of these projects.

**Q. What are the main issues impacting the region's future?**

Transportation is key going forward. The Houston region is the gateway of North America for international trade. We need to find a way to move freight more efficiently throughout the state. The highways in and around Harris County are getting very congested, and improvements need to be made if we are to capitalize on our advantages in this arena.

In terms of Harris County, mass transit will come since simply adding more and more highways is not a viable long-term solution. However, the way the area has developed over time means that traditional fixed commuter rail isn't

a very practical solution. Harris County is big but not nearly as dense as many of the other large cities in the U.S. This region is very large and as population has grown, people moved into the suburbs for schools and affordable housing. In general, rail is not flexible to move with the demand as workers and companies relocate and evolve in the region.

That said, I think whatever solution ultimately evolves will include some commuter rail, and there have been opportunities missed in the past. In particular, the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad included a rail line coming from Katy directly to downtown, which would have been a great piece to include in a broader mass transit solution.

**Q. How do you see the aftermath of Harvey affecting the future regional economy? Has it been traumatic enough to hamper medium- to long-term growth?**

I think it is too early to tell. There have been three 500-year floods in the past two years. Obviously, we have a problem with what our definition of a 500-year flood is, because we can't assume we'll go another 1,500 years without a significant flood. We need to start over and redefine our flood plains.

The bigger issue facing the economy here in terms of future growth is the national and global perception of Houston and Harris County. How do people outside of Houston perceive the area as a place to live? While only about 5 to 7 percent of Harris County homes were damaged, there is a narrative out there that the area was totally inundated and that homes and businesses are likely to flood. A lot of our conversations are about how to counteract that narrative and push the positives of the region.