

Mitigation best practices



FEMA

Storm proves Surfside Beach buyouts were good investment

Saving lives and dollars — preventing heartache

At a glance

With help from FEMA and the State of Texas, the village of Surfside Beach helped nine families move from the beachfront to high ground in 2006. Shortly after the houses were removed, Hurricane Ike washed the entire front row of remaining houses into the Gulf of Mexico — proving the wisdom of this investment in hazard mitigation.



Aerial photos of Surfside Beach before and after Hurricane Ike. Before the storm, nine of the front-row houses were cleared. Ike washed out the remaining first row of houses. FEMA Photo.

SURFSIDE BEACH, Texas — “It’s smart to know when to say, ‘Enough is enough.’”

That was Mayor Larry Davison’s assessment after Hurricane Ike struck Surfside Beach on Sept. 13, 2008. He’s glad his town knew when to pull back from its beloved beachfront. The decision wasn’t easy at the time — but it saved millions of dollars and countless tears.

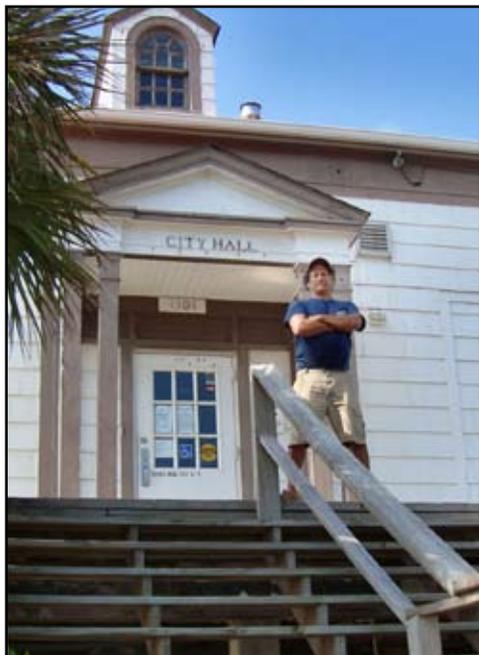
In 2006, Surfside Beach bought and cleared nine houses from a beachfront row along the Gulf of Mexico. In 2008, Hurricane Ike proved it was a sound investment. The storm wiped out all of the remaining houses on the front row.

The buyout was made possible in part with funds from the State of Texas and from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), whose Hazard Mitigation Grant Program is aimed at reducing risk and chronic losses from flooding and wind damage. The program in Surfside Beach also includes the planned relocation of 11 other beachfront homes and the construction of a new sea barricade.

Surfside Beach, which traces its history to 1821, is the kind of place that people up north dream about on cold winter nights. The Gulf sparkles in the sunlight and white-capped waves lap softly against the shore.



Houses on the beachfront row became battering rams during Hurricane Ike, wrecking neighboring homes.



Phil Boreen - FEMA

Mayor Larry Davison in front of Surfside's elevated City Hall.

Homes are painted in soothing sea-foam green, coral and lavender. Sand drifts lazily along streets, which bear such idyllic names as Seashell, Saltgrass and Sandpebble.

The village, however, is in a fight for its future. The cherished beach is eroding dramatically, leaving many homes at severe risk of ruin from storm and sea. After a series of tropical storms and bouts of flooding from hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Hurricane Ike



Peggy and Norman Llewellyn point to their home's former location.



Hurricane Ike destroyed Surfside Beach homes in the Gulf of Mexico.

tore through the town with a storm surge of 7 to 10 feet and winds above 100 mph. Homes along the first row were ripped off their moorings and either given up to the sea or hurled in pieces into the second row of houses.

Davison said he originally paid little attention to letters he received advertising the availability of FEMA's HMGP funds. Now he says he is thrilled he learned of the grant program in time for Ike.

"We didn't understand about hazard mitigation," he said. "Now we understand — it's an investment up front to save money in the long term by reducing disaster losses. Those savings will be multiplied again and again over the years."

Now that the Gulf has claimed the first row of houses, Peggy and Norman Llewellyn know they made the right decision in 2006. After a lot of soul-searching, they took advantage of the state and federal funding to relocate their house several blocks from the beach.

"It was very hard to move off the beachfront," said Peggy Llewellyn, an engineer and Surfside Beach city councilor. "We had a lovely house. But we kept getting damages — Katrina, Rita, the tropical storms and the bull tides two years ago. We were constantly making repairs."

Except for some relatively minor damage from another home's lost roof, the Llewellyn's relocated house suffered no damages as a result of Hurricane Ike. Meanwhile, their old beachfront lot disappeared into the surf.

"If we still lived there, we would have lost everything," Peggy said.

Davidson has some sage advice to offer other mayors who are trying to reduce disaster losses.

"Read your mail," he said. "Don't give up. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you've said 'enough!' Don't be afraid to make hard decisions . . . so you can stop these repetitive losses once and for all."

Story by Ann Patton - FEMA