

South Texas officials defend heavy preparation for Hurricane Dean

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McALLEN, August 22 - Hidalgo County Judge J.D. Salinas and state Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, met at the International Museum of Art & Science in McAllen to discuss funding possibilities for the institution.

Their thoughts, however, turned quickly to criticism from Bexar County Commissioner Lyle Larson that state and local elected officials went way overboard in their preparations for Hurricane Dean.

Larson made his views known to *KENS 5 TV* and the *San Antonio Express-News*. He said the state wasted millions of dollars despite knowing Hurricane Dean was not headed our way.

"We had aircraft sitting at the tune of \$10,000 a day out at Kelly AFB, just in the event they needed to be deployed," Larson said.

The commissioner implied that because the images of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath are etched on the nation's conscience state emergency management overreacted.

"The problem is, you do this two or three times, then people are gonna say, 'Do you really need us?' There's gonna be ... complacency's gonna take place," Larson said.

Larson added that while the state has to have a plan in place, resources did not have to be deployed in South Texas knowing that they were not going to be needed.

Larson's comments angered Salinas in particular. The Hidalgo county judge has been praised by FEMA for the level of preparation made for Hurricane Dean. Salinas said he respected Larson but questioned how much he knew about South Texas.

"You do not want to wait until that hurricane is right on your backdoor. Maybe this is something that Commissioner Larson does not know, once it passed the Yucatan Peninsula, it was going to move fast," Salinas said.

The state's emergency management coordination included the Texas Department of Transportation dispatching hundreds of loaded gasoline tanker trucks and more than 1,000 buses to South Texas.

"I don't think we were overreacting. I think we were well prepared. I publicly thank the Governor and Jack Colley for bringing their forces down here," Salinas told the *Guardian*. Colley is the state's emergency management coordinator.



Hidalgo County J.D. Salinas discusses Hurricane Dean preparedness at the IMAS museum in McAllen on Wednesday. (Photo: RGG/Steve Taylor)

Salinas pointed out that the state requires local governments to start evacuating residents 48 hours before a hurricane. He said it takes 48 hours before that to have everything in place.

Had the Rio Grande Valley's structurally suspect levees system been threatened, Salinas said, he would have been looking at moving 536,000 people in Hidalgo County alone, including 7,000 liver patients and 36,000 people with special needs. That would have been on top of those that could have left by their own means.

"It was the biggest evacuation plan in the United States' history," Salinas said. "You can't do it in 24, 48, hours. You need time to get them out. And learning from Katrina, and New Orleans, and Houston, it's not easy getting people out."

Coincidentally, Salinas and Gonzales were discussing emergency management issues right next to a model of the Lower Rio Grande basin. Salinas pointed to the model and the tributaries in northern Mexico that feed the Rio Grande, such as the Rio Salado, the Rio Sabinas, and the Rio San Juan. He pointed out that the dams in northern Mexico are 95 percent full.

"Commissioner Lyle Larson may not understand the infrastructure or lack of infrastructure we have. Ten inches of rain in Mexico, with 95 percent capacity in some of their lakes, would have gone into the Rio Grande River. Anzalduas Dam at 95 percent would have indirectly impacted us," Salinas said.

"Whether the hurricane was coming directly or not, we still had a situation where we had to have our resources ready. I'm sorry, but San Antonio is not South Texas. I'd rather have our resources here, and get our residents out, than having to wait for them to save us."

Salinas said it was worth remembering that Hurricane Dean was bigger than the size of Texas. "Even if it hit 50 miles south of Brownsville, we were going to get a big, serious, situation here," he said. "If I had to do it again I would call even more resources together because I am not going to put the lives of Hidalgo County residents at chance. I am not a gambler. I am not going to be a gambler."

Gonzales agreed. She said the evacuation buses that came to the Valley from as far away as Florida and Tennessee would never have made it had the state waited.

"By the time they would have gotten here, we would have been underwater. It's better to plan ahead. They always tell you, make sure you plan ahead. And then, you plan ahead and you are criticized for planning too much. Which is it? I'd rather be safe than sorry," Gonzales told the *Guardian*. "We don't want to be the Ninth Ward in the state of Texas."

Salinas said he intends to write to Larson to invite him to come to the Valley to see how precarious its levee system is. He said the commissioner must realize that the Toyota plant in San Antonio is dependent on parts from the Delphi maquiladora in Reynosa.

"It's unfortunate that article came out. I am contemplating a letter to Commissioner Larson and maybe educating him and asking him to come visit us locally, instead of making those public comments," Salinas said.

According to the International Boundary and Water Commission, parts of the Valley's levee system need to be raised six feet. In 2001, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers surveyed the system, identifying 67 miles where structures need to be repaired or raised. Carlos Marin, head of the U.S. section of the IBWC, puts the cost of the repair project at \$125 million. This year, the House has earmarked \$15.5 million, while the Senate has penciled in \$10 million.

Salinas said his next move would be to set up a meeting with Gov. Rick Perry's office to ask the Governor to get behind the push for more levee funding. "He needs to know what is going on. We need to help him help us. We need to get that meeting pretty soon," Salinas said.

Gonzales said she would help facilitate the meeting. "I would think that with his background in agriculture, he (Perry) would be very critically concerned about this," Gonzales said. "I would think that he would want to come down here and push for Washington to fund it as much as they can."