



Homeowners await grants so they can rebuild

By Leigh Jones
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GALVESTON — The lot on 10 Mile Road where Dorothy and William Auzston's house stood for 61 years is overgrown, with nothing left to decorate the front yard but a broken bird bath and the concrete steps that once led to the front door.

Behind the steps, three rows of tall wooden pilings are the only thing the couple has to show for almost a year of work and waiting.

The Auzstons are among about 700 families who are dependent on federal disaster recovery money to undo the damage wrought by Hurricane Ike, which made landfall Sept. 13, almost one year ago.

While most Galvestonians have finished repairing their roofs, walls and flooring, the island's poorest property owners still are waiting for a piece of the \$103.9 million the city has set aside for housing repair projects.

City officials, who cannot start awarding grants until the state signs off on the spending plan, acknowledge the recovery assistance process has been slow.

Almost A Year

"I figured after a year we should be getting somewhere," William Auzston said.

The native islander, 83, is homeless for the first time in his life.

Auzston built the couple's house himself, when he was 22, and has lived there ever since.

Dorothy Auzston, 60, had to wipe away tears that trickled down her cheeks as she talked about what happened Sept. 13.

"It was like a big old giant whirlpool," she said.

Because the house had withstood hurricanes Carla and Alicia, the couple decided not to

evacuate ahead of Hurricane Ike.

The storm's surge poured over the low-lying west end and filled the house with about 5 feet of water.

The Auzstons held hands as they cried and prayed, convinced they were going to drown. But before the silt-saturated water rose over their heads, it started to recede back to Galveston Bay.

Doing What They Can

During the night, Ike knocked out the house's front door and ripped away the south wall, damage the Auzstons thought they could fix.

But two days later, after they'd evacuated to San Antonio, someone set fire to what was left, after looting jewelry, crystal and jars of money.

The Auzstons, who live on a fixed income and didn't have insurance, got the maximum \$28,800 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to replace what they lost and to start making repairs.

After buying a used car and a 30-foot travel trailer they could live in, the couple started working on building a new 736-square-foot house, half the size of their old one.

They stretched the money far enough to have the 15 pilings set and buy lumber for the floor joists. They hope they will qualify for some of the disaster relief money to pay for the rest.

Accepting Applications

The city has so far sent out about 750 applications to property owners interested in getting some of the money, Grants and Housing Development Director Sterling Patrick said.

About 100 people have completed the application paperwork, he said.

The city plans to repair, elevate or rebuild 1,180 houses within the next two years.

Patrick said he expects more property owners will apply for funds once the city hires a contractor to manage the program and launches a campaign to educate people about available assistance. City officials have interviewed management firms but have not recommended a finalist for city council approval.

To qualify for the program, property owners must meet federal low-income guidelines and be up-to-date on all property taxes. The house cannot have any liens filed against it,

and owners must agree to carry flood insurance when the work is done.

Long Wait

Patrick would not say when the city might start approving applications and sending out crews to make repairs. Everything depends on the state now, he said.

The Auzstons, who have submitted their application, said they hope they won't have to wait much longer. One year is long enough, William Auzston said.

"Time is wasting," he said.

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How To Apply

Download an application for the city's disaster recovery housing program at www.cityofgalveston.org.

Click on "Online Services" and then on "Printable city of Galveston forms."

The application is listed under the "Grants and Housing Department" heading.

For information, call 409-797-3820.

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