TRANSPORTATION NEWS

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Hurricane Rita: Special Issue

On the cover:
Hurricane Rita's assault on Texas made state, national and international headlines last September. This special issue focuses on TxDOT's response.

— Photo-illustration by Jeremy G. Boehm

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Executive Director
Mike Behrens
Deputy Executive Director
Steve Simmons
Publisher
Randall Dillard
Editor
Mike Cox
Managing Editor
Tim Cunningham
Associate Editor
Randy Ormsby
Judith Curtis
Graphic Design
Jeremy G. Boehm

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Straight Talk

Our work — it's about people

by Mike Behrens
Executive Director

Mike Behrens

I don't think I've ever been prouder of the TxDOT family than I am right now.

After Hurricane Rita slammed ashore near the Texas-Louisiana border, TxDOT maintenance crews, sign crews, bridge inspectors, and others worked around the clock in the Beaumont and Lufkin districts to repair the storm's damage.

A dozen or more TxDOT districts provided personnel, equipment, or some sort of support.

All major roads in the area had been cleared of debris within four days of landfall. Only a couple of counties delayed re-entry due to lack of utilities.

Ahead of the storm, hundreds of TxDOT personnel helped coordinate the massive, historically unprecedented evacuation of upwards of 2.5 million people on the highways leading out of Houston.

More than a dozen districts sent out Courtesy Patrol vehicles or any vehicles that could carry gas cans to help motorists stranded without fuel get back on the road.

Maintenance yards along evacuation routes opened up their pumps to fuel-starved motorists.

Our folks at the state operations center worked with the National Guard and the U.S. Coast Guard to provide additional fuel.

For the first time ever, we implemented contraflow lanes on major routes out of Houston so traffic on both sides of two highways were headed out. In a perfect world, traffic on all lanes of all highways would have been headed away from harm, but staffing limitations, and the logistics of blocking every highway entrance to avoid head-on collisions, made this impossible.

Still, the evacuation was a success in that millions of people who wanted to leave were eventually able to do so well before the hurricane hit.

But that's not the end of the story. I have established a group to catalog lessons learned from this experience and use them to develop an action plan to improve our efforts.

At TxDOT, we too often think of our responsibilities as being limited to getting roads built, maintained and repaired. And that is our main responsibility.

But in times of crisis, we need to step back and see the reason we build those roads in the first place. It's not about roads — it's about people.

Thank you for everything you have done and are doing in this time of need. I ask only that you help me make sure that we do an even better job next time.✪

TxDOT heroes shine during recent disasters

by Zane L. Webb
Director, Maintenance Division

Webb

Heroes. There's no other word to describe TxDOT employees over the last month or so. I've always known that I worked with some great folks, but Katrina and Rita put us all to the test. I am so proud to report that TxDOT passed the test with flying colors.

That's not to say that there weren't problems and there aren't things we could have done better. And we will, next time. But what you all did (and some of you are still doing) was nothing short of heroic.

This special combined issue of *Transportation News* and *Maintenance Matters* is dedicated to stories of TxDOT heroes. I don't want to steal the thunder from any of those stories, but there are a few individuals whose performance I saw firsthand who I'd like to personally thank.

First, to all of you in the districts who responded to Katrina and Rita by delivering message boards, helping evacuees, helping motorists, and all the others jobs you did, including camping out to be where needed to clear roads, thank you for all you did, and are still doing.

I'd like to thank **Scott Alley**, our emergency management coordinator and director of the Maintenance Division's Support Branch. Scott spent the better part of almost every day (and several very long nights) in the state operations center (SOC) since just before Katrina hit Louisiana. From his command post (a laptop and a telephone), he coordinated most of TxDOT's response to both disasters.

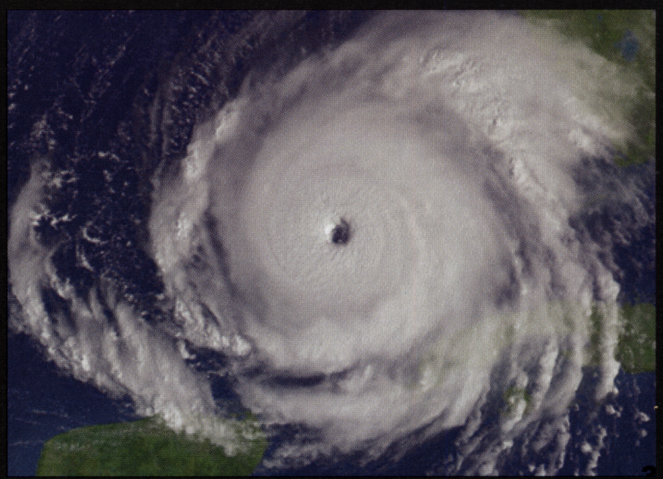
I'd also like to thank **Joe Graff**, Maintenance Division deputy director, who also spent many long hours at the SOC coordinating efforts, meeting with state officials, and cutting red tape to get things done. Joe even spent several days in the Beaumont District helping arrange for emergency contracts and doing anything that needed to be done. At one point, he even served as a traffic flagger when he drove up on an 18-wheeler that had locked its brakes and was blocking traffic.

John Barton, Beaumont's district engineer, worked many long hours to oversee the cleanup efforts after Rita struck. He also did a great job of keeping us current with progress reports and acting as an advocate for his weary crew. **Catherine Hejl**, director of maintenance in the Bryan District, was a key player in the staging of crews and equipment prior to Rita's landfall. Afterwards, she was everywhere, helping any way she could. Those are just two of hundreds of employees in the districts who gave and are still giving so much to this effort.

Outside the Maintenance Division, I also want to recognize at least one individual who played a huge role in our success: **Glenn Hagler,** director of purchasing. Glenn and his staff worked long into the night on many nights to be sure our crews in the field were properly outfitted and had the tools and supplies they needed to complete their missions. Whatever we needed, Glenn and his staff were there for us.

Others in the division also spent long hours at the SOC and staffed a 24-hour command center I established in our offices just prior to Rita's landfall and for a few days after. There are too many to list by name, but you know who you are. Your efforts were no less heroic and are very much appreciated. Thank you all for the work you do on a daily basis. You are truly TxDOT heroes.✪

Hurricane Rita: a "slide show" — Images from Rita came from many sources as the storm approached, as it made landfall, as people surveyed the destruction left in its wake, and as TxDOT people worked to clear roads and repair traffic-control signs. For this special edition, on this and following pages, here are but a few moments of photography left to remind us what TxDOT faced and what the people of the department endured and achieved throughout the ordeal.



Hurricane challenges Texas, department

After coming ashore on the upper Texas coast in the predawn hours of Sept. 24, the left side of Hurricane Rita swept across Lufkin later that Saturday morning, toppling pine trees, ripping down utility wires and doing moderate damage in Angelina and surrounding counties.

As the winds roared and the rain blew, a contingent of Beaumont District personnel led by District Engineer **John Barton** rode out the storm in a makeshift command center at the Lufkin District campus. After facilitating a contraflow evacuation along U.S. 69 and U.S. 96, the district-in-exile had arrived in Lufkin the night before, among the last to leave the Beaumont-Port Arthur area as a Category 3 hurricane swept toward the Golden Triangle.

About 2 p.m. that Saturday, the Beaumont folks left in a 30-vehicle convoy of white state vehicles — yellow lights flashing — to retake their district.

The plan had been that the trailered front-end loader in the lead would clear debris and trees off U.S. 69 back into Beaumont from Lufkin, a distance of 109 miles. The highway turned out to be mostly unobstructed, but as the TxDOT vehicles moved south, people stood in their yards and watched the trucks go by, waving or giving thumbs-up signs.

The more-populated Houston-Galveston area had missed a direct hit by Rita, but the storm brought serious damage to Southeast Texas, particularly the eight-county Beaumont District. Though no highway infrastructure received any significant damage, numerous signs and signals gave way to the destructive storm. In addition, almost every employee in the district had varying levels of damage to their residences.

Though the Beaumont and Lufkin districts took the hardest hit, Rita affected TxDOT employees as far away as Amarillo, where district workers assisted with an influx of special needs evacuees airlifted from the path of the storm, to Austin to Pharr, where maintenance workers left to help in the Beaumont District.

Not since Hurricane Carla in 1961 has a hurricane caused as much damage in Texas or had as much impact on TxDOT.

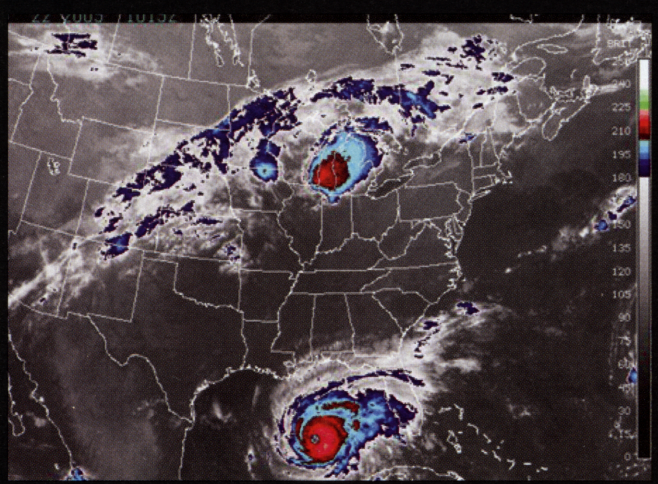
Clearly, this is a story that needs to be told for posterity's sake. To do that better, we have published a special all-Rita combined issue of Transportation News and Maintenance Matters, the quarterly newsletter of the Maintenance Division. Additional articles on TxDOT's role during the Rita crisis can be found on the department's intranet under the Public Information Office.

It's still too early to have all the facts and figures connected to TxDOT's response to this storm, but this issue offers a wide-screen view of what TxDOT did. It's a story that should make all of us proud to be a part of TxDOT.✪

Not since Hurricane Carla in 1961 has a hurricane caused as much damage in Texas or had as much impact on TxDOT.

Letter from the editor

by Mike Cox



Rita looked like the 'Big One' aiming at Texas

by Mike Cox
Editor

For a time it looked like Hurricane Rita would be the dreaded Big One for Texas — a Category 5 storm hitting Galveston and Houston.

"Our focus is simple," Executive Director **Mike Behrens** said as Rita intensified. "We will provide the road to safety, we will clear the road to recovery, and we will maintain the road home."

Fortunately for Texas, the hurricane veered northeast from the densely populated Houston-Galveston area and it lost some strength before making landfall on the Texas-Louisiana border at 2:30 a.m. on Sept. 24 as a Category 3 storm with winds of 120 mph, gusting to 155 mph.

Even though it lost some of its punch, Rita still will go into National Weather Service records as the most devastating hurricane to hit Texas since Carla in 1961.

As of early November, one insurance-services company estimated Rita's damage could result in $4.7 billion in insurance claims for losses to residential and commercial property. ISO Property Claim Services said damage from Rita was reported in seven states, with losses totaling $2.4 billion in Louisiana and $2.2 billion in Texas, with Beaumont, Orange and Port Arthur "suffering extensive wind damage."

Though no official death count has been made, news organizations polling justices of the peace and medical examiners attribute at least 121 deaths to the storm — six from the storm itself, nine from carbon monoxide poisoning from improper use of portable generators and the rest, evacuees. If that count holds, Rita will have been the deadliest hurricane in the state since an unnamed storm killed 284 people in and around Corpus Christi in 1919.

TxDOT's greatest test in the Rita Crisis came on Sept. 22, when officials ordered the evacuation of Galveston Island and other low-lying areas in the Houston metropolitan area. Traffic began streaming out of the area and gridlock soon developed as some 2.5 million people undertook the largest evacuation in the state's history.

Early that morning, at the request of the Governor's Division of Emergency Management, engineers in the Houston District quickly developed a plan to contraflow major segments of Interstate 45 and I-10 to facilitate the evacuation.

Soon, stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, drivers began running out of fuel and patience. TxDOT responded by sending every available Courtesy Patrol vehicle and as many other maintenance vehicles as possible to assist motorists. The department also opened maintenance yards to evacuees, dispensing enough gasoline to get motorists out of harm's way.

When it began to look like Rita would strike

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TxDOT responds to Rita's many challenges

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Beaumont instead of Galveston, employees in the Beaumont District set up contraflow on portions of U.S. 69 and U.S. 96 to speed the evacuation of the Golden Triangle. Fuel availability also became a problem along these routes.

After it became obvious that the Houston-Galveston area had been spared the brunt of the storm, TxDOT worked with state and local officials to set into place a staggered re-entry into the metropolitan area. The plan worked, with far fewer traffic problems than occurred during the evacuation.

A month after landfall, state officials had counted 5,189 single-family dwellings as destroyed with 18,640 additional residences listed as heavily damaged. Another 52,832 dwellings received minor damage from the storm. In addition, 1,810 mobile homes had been destroyed along with 483 apartments.

At least seven Beaumont District employees lost their homes in the hurricane, according to District Engineer **John Barton**. Many other TxDOT employees suffered some degree of personal property loss. A campaign undertaken by TxDOT to raise money to help Louisiana and Mississippi DOT employees affected by Hurricane Katrina was expanded to provide contributions to TxDOT workers who experienced loss in Rita.

Despite the ferocity of the storm, with the lone exception of the State Highway 82 swing bridge connecting Texas and Louisiana, none of the highways or bridges in Rita's path sustained any serious damage. Fallen trees and downed power lines blocked many roadways for a time, but within a few days, all roads in the Beaumont District had been made passable. Numerous signs and signals got blown down, but an around-the-clock effort soon had them back up. At one point, TxDOT had 801 employees and 631 pieces of equipment involved in the recovery effort.

A month after landfall, state officials had counted 5,189 single-family dwellings as destroyed with 18,640 additional residences listed as heavily damaged.

On Sunday, Oct. 2, still living at the district office along with most of his employees, Barton conducted a short prayer service with his co-workers. "We offered our thanks for those who have and continue to assist during this event," he said, "and asked that you each be blessed and realize how much you are appreciated and loved."✪

'Unforgettable' Rita hits hard at Beaumont

by Marc Shepherd
Beaumont District

It began as a nameless gentle wisp of wind somewhere in the middle of an African desert. Working its way westward, the soft breeze became a group of storm clouds off the coast of western Africa.

On Sept. 17, just east of the Turks and Caicos Islands, the soupy mix of clouds, rain, and wind gave birth to a tropical depression. Southeast Texans — 1,612 miles away — paid little, if any, attention.

That would soon change.

Sue Tidwell began the week of Sept. 19 as she would any other week. The Beaumont District planning assistant had little idea what the storm would have in store for her. As Tidwell plugged away at her job, Tropical Depression 18 turned into Hurricane Rita. It passed through the Florida Straits, whipped up on Key West, and blew into the Gulf. Rita, with its 175 mph winds was setting its sights on the Lone Star State. Texans from Brownsville to Orange suddenly started paying attention, guessing where it would hit.

On the evening of Sept. 23, Rita left no doubt where it would strike. The community of Sabine Pass was its target, threatening with it the cities of Port Arthur, Orange, and Beaumont.

Meanwhile, as Rita churned its way toward Sabine Pass, the roads and highways of Southeast Texas quickly became parking lots. Jefferson, Orange, Chambers, Liberty, Hardin, Tyler, Jasper and Newton counties called for mandatory evacuations. People, however, took no chances and began leaving the Wednesday before the mandatory order.

Approximately 550,000 residents made the mad rush to the north. Tidwell headed for her sister's lake house at Toledo Bend. It was a trip she won't soon forget. What normally takes two hours turned into a 10-hour ordeal.

"It wasn't so much the slow-moving traffic. Everyone expected that. It was the non-existent movement and not knowing why. That was the most frustrating part of the evacuation," said Tidwell — "the not knowing."

As the slow-motion evacuation snaked its way northward, TxDOT maintenance crews and other hurricane-essential employees jumped into the evacuation lines fueling vehicles and assisting stranded motorists.

Beaumont District personnel answered plea after plea for help. Calls came from families with car problems, and from caravans of handicapped and disabled people broken down in the middle of a rural highway far from home.

District personnel eventually rounded up more than 100 buses that carried nearly 800 stranded people from remote highways.

Then Rita arrived.

Tropical-storm winds hit first. Rita's somewhat weakened category 3 winds made landfall around midnight. Soon all of Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana lost power as Rita pounded the upper Gulf Coast.

While America watched television images of Rita's fury, Tidwell and her sister, even though far from the coast, watched it in person. "The winds were fairly high. No lightning or thunder…not very much rain," said Tidwell. "The winds pushed water away from the bank toward

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Nearly everyone loses something in storm

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the center of the lake."

Farther to the south in Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange, winds dropped trees onto and into homes, lifted roofs, and pushed an 18-foot storm surge into many houses. Sabine was quickly taken apart as Rita pushed barges into buildings and dismantled houses.

When the storm ended, people got a chance to see the extent of the damage.

Tidwell's house in Vidor felt the full impact of the storm. A relative described to her by phone what was left of the property after taking a hit from a 200-year old pin oak. "It was leveled," Tidwell said of her home. "It took out the bed in the bedroom, went across both closets, the utility room, kitchen, and right across the living room, taking out everything."

She takes the loss in stride, putting everything into perspective: "I'm not an emotional person," she said. "The way I look at it, I needed a new roof anyway. I just wasn't planning for new walls and floors to go along with it."

Nearly every employee in the Beaumont District lost something in the storm, though no injuries were reported. For some it was their entire house. For others, it was a roof, garage, or vehicle. Many sustained less significant damage such as lost fences or shingles. However, the full extent is still being realized as floors and walls buckle and mold consumes houses that took water.

Rita caused billions of dollars in damages. According to Entergy officials, the local power provider, 86 percent of the power grid in Southeast Texas received catastrophic damage. Many businesses and houses in the more rural sections of the area lacked electrical power weeks after Rita's visit.

Tidwell and thousands of other Southeast Texans are finding that getting back to normal can be difficult.

"You are only reacting on what needs to be done," said Tidwell. "I haven't had time to think, only react. Now you are trying to find out what you have left and re-establish your home in another area…but not in a sane and orderly manner."

Rita wrapped up its destruction on the coast and moved to damaging cities inland. Jasper, Woodville and Newton all saw extensive damage. Rita worked its way northward, all the while losing steam, but with enough force to cause damage to areas of the Lufkin District. Rita would eventually weaken, winding its way up the northeastern part of the United States and heading to the colder waters of the northern Atlantic seaboard. There the storm would end how it began — in a puff of wind.

Rita leaves behind a trail of destruction and a storm Texans, at least in this part of the state, won't soon forget.✪

"I haven't had time to think, only react. Now you are trying to find out what you have left and re-establish your home in another area...but not in a sane and orderly manner."

— Sue Tidwell

Rush by evacuees forces office lockdown

by Kathi White
Lufkin District

Everyone at TxDOT's San Augustine County office in the Lufkin District breathed a big sigh of relief at the slow return to normalcy. Workers went through a terrifying three-hour ordeal just prior to Hurricane Rita's lashing of the county.

The office was locked down on Friday (Sept. 23) after some hurricane evacuees rushed in begging for water, food, fuel, and use of the facilities. Supervisor **John Mathews** said the evacuees became threatening and the situation quickly got out of control. Local law enforcement support was unavailable at first due to heavy evacuation traffic.

"Before the storm, we had a near riot," Mathews said. "Seventy people were inside this office. It took three hours to get them all out and lock down the office. We finally barricaded the driveway."

Mathews said the evacuees became very threatening.

"We had some of them even threatening to overtake us with pipes and knives to get all the gas they wanted," he said. "The yard was really littered once we got them all on their way. There were piles of baby diapers out there ... and lots of other debris. As soon as they were all gone, we went out and started cleaning it all up. And that was before the storm.

"Those people behaved that way because they were aggravated and tired and thirsty and hungry," he continued. "We understood that and we felt really bad for them and what they were going through. They had nothing and what little we were trying to give them wasn't enough."

Mathews said that, while there were threats, he never saw an evacuee with a weapon of any sort.

Brad Tiemann, San Augustine County area engineer, was at the district disaster center at the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) in Lufkin during the ordeal at his office. He was serving as a liaison between DPS and TxDOT during the unprecedented evacuation of millions of Texans.

"John (Mathews) called me on my cell phone to let me know about the situation," Tiemann said. "I remember when I informed the DPS troopers that 70 people had basically taken over our TxDOT office, they all looked at me in disbelief.

"As John relayed information to me, I was able to give it directly to DPS and they made some calls. As I understand it, not long afterward a constable and some DPS troopers arrived at our office to help disperse the crowd. It was a very stressful situation to say the least, but thanks to the law enforcement officers it did not get any uglier."

By Friday evening in San Augustine (population 2,475), the city had become overwhelmed by more than 4,000 evacuees from the Jasper, Beaumont-Port Arthur, and other coastal areas. Among them were 2,000 people being housed at the high school gym, and up to 800 at the livestock-auction facility.

"There was looting of almost every corner store in San Augustine," Matthews said.

In spite of the scary moments at the office, and the never-ending traffic making its way through San Augustine County, Mathews and his crews, with employees from the area engineer's office, spent a lot of time on the road taking care of TxDOT business.

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Normalcy returns; families eye destruction

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"My entire crew worked 30 hours straight until all 39 roads in this county were passable," he said. "We started as soon as the eye (of Rita) passed on. We distributed fuel to around 700 vehicles. We also provided fuel to all state and local officials. Everybody was tired but we couldn't stop until the job was done."

In Rita's aftermath, Mathews' devastated look wasn't just from the demands of work — his home sustained major damage.

"Forty feet of patio porch is gone," he said. "A third of the brick on the back wall of my house is on the ground, one back window is blown out, and the roof — the entire length of the back side of my house — is raised anywhere from eight inches to a foot-and-a-half above the top of the wall. All of the carpet in the hallway and living room was removed due to water damage, and the downstairs entertainment room, which is three and half feet below the rest of the house was flooded. There was three inches of standing water because of the roof damage."

The Mathews family sheltered eight family members who evacuated from Galveston and whose home there, ironically, was not damaged during the storm.

"It may sound sad but no one is complaining," Mathews said. "We are just glad to still have our family."

Other San Augustine County employees sustained some property damage but none was hit as hard as Mathews. Some of the damage reported by other employees included roofs, barns, fences, downed trees, and yard problems.

The San Augustine office received very little damage when a pear tree fell on the building. Also, the back fence was broken when a pine tree fell on it, and an elm tree was uprooted in the front yard.✪

Paris District employees lend a hand

On Friday, Sept. 23, **Keith Jenkins** and **George Cooper** from the Lamar County Maintenance Office and **Stanley Roberts** and **Jason Sartor** from the Delta County Maintenance Section volunteered to help stranded motorists in the Lufkin District. Fuel trailers and gas containers were readied and the crew left with 700 gallons of gasoline. The plan was to provide five gallons of free gas to each stranded vehicle to get them on their way.

Roberts and Sartor remember how appreciative people were when they showed up with fuel. They said they had never seen as many vehicles parked on the side of the road without fuel. Most people had been there for many hours and were very tired, hungry and thirsty. It was quite an adventure to help those who couldn't help themselves.

The Paris District employees took shelter inside the Lufkin District Office during the storm. After the storm passed through Lufkin, the employees helped clear the roadways of debris.

Two Paris District signal technicians (**Tim Dorner** of Greenville and **Jim Lewis** of Sherman) went to the Beaumont District to restore some of the many signals that were downed or destroyed.✪

— by Jan Barnes, Paris District

Truck drivers assist road crews with traffic

by Kathi White
Lufkin District

With the traffic volume into Nacogdoches constantly multiplying, **Kim Hogan** was silently praying for help as he conducted traffic control for road-weary motorists fleeing the impending Hurricane Rita.

Hogan, a four-year maintenance tech in the Lufkin District's office in Nacogdoches County, began this Friday morning like no other — stationed on U.S. 59 directing lines of hurricane traffic entering Nacogdoches.

Just one day before Rita's expected landfall — with her wrath reaching even this city — Hogan found himself alone (although co-worker **Wayne Henley** handled a different section of highway nearby) on the extremely congested evacuation route.

About halfway through his 13-hour shift came an offer of assistance — an offer that a tired Hogan jokingly accepted.

"The traffic was awful and it was pretty scary out there," he said. "People were pulling in and out of lanes, and some were making their own lanes and even getting in the southbound lanes. It was crazy, and the only protection I had was my hard hat and vest, and a little one-ton truck. Around 4 o'clock there were some trucks coming through and this driver in a truck from Michigan rolled down his window and said, 'I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna get you some help.' I just laughed and said I could sure use it."

Hogan said before long he looked around and was amazed.

"All of these trucks were staggered along the lanes," he said. "Apparently, the Michigan driver had radioed all truckers in the area or something and now they were implementing some kind of traffic-control system themselves. Honestly, it was amazing. There would be one truck on the shoulder, one in the inside lane and another in the outside lane, and they would slow down and stagger themselves across northbound lanes.

"They would drive real slowly before getting to me, and we were first wondering why and then we figured out they were helping us. The first truck driver must have noticed how motorists were cutting in and out and jumping lanes. It was a dangerous situation. Anyway, I looked around and there were some 30 trucks in the same pattern for at least two miles. It actually helped calm the traffic flow. Every time these truckers came through they'd roll down their window and wave and smile."✪

Waco District, Thursday morning, Sept. 22

A couple from Lake Jackson had been on the road 23 hours when they drove into our complex parking lot. They were traveling with their 120-pound St. Bernard. None of the shelters could accommodate a dog that large and the woman was in tears worrying about her pet. I accompanied the couple to my vet's office. She not only boarded "Brewski," but charged only half the usual rate. The couple found shelter in Gholson. **Mike Vincent** (Waco District Traffic Office) gave them the phone number of a local bed and breakfast where they stayed through the weekend. I was thankful for the opportunity to help out the family and my "fourlegged-evacuee friend."✪

— Debby Burleson, Waco District

Lufkin pair assists woman in 'special delivery'

Editor's note: *Kathi White, public information officer in the Lufkin District, provided this first-hand account of her first time as a midwife during Hurricane Rita. It was an experience she's not eager to repeat.*

The evacuation of Southeast Texas residents during Hurricane Rita resulted in many TxDOT employees departing from their normal job duties. For instance, some Lufkin District personnel found themselves playing the role of first responders of sort — and coming close to making a special delivery.

Just before midnight on Friday, Sept. 23, the Lufkin district's emergency-operations center received a call from a woman who had run out of gas in Zavalla with her 100 year-old mother, who was ill, in the vehicle. **David Collmorgen**, Lufkin area engineer, and I elected to make the run to deliver fuel to the stranded motorist.

Jumping into Collmorgen's TxDOT pickup, we traveled down State Highway 103 and various farm-to-market roads to avoid the gridlocked traffic on U.S. 69. Reaching our destination in the small Angelina County town a short time later, we soon found ourselves surrounded by stranded motorists needing fuel, drinking water, and a hospital.

This was my first real trip out into the traffic since the evacuation began. It was surreal and all I could see was red taillights near and far in front of us. When I looked back, all I could see were headlights and cars, angled this way and that, trying to make it north on a gridlocked highway.

We found the vehicle we were looking for and David gave me the hose to hold in the car's tank while he pumped the gas.

All of these people wanting gas surrounded us but I knew we were in trouble when I saw a young woman get out of another car kind of hunched over and holding her stomach. We knew she was in labor and she confirmed that. In fact, the contractions were five minutes apart. This started a series of interesting events for us.

David and I snapped into emergency mode as we ushered the young woman and her mother into the TxDOT truck. We assured them that it would be quicker, safer, and easier to maneuver the traffic in the TxDOT vehicle with the overhead lights running.

Normally, a trip from Zavalla to Lufkin would be about 30 minutes, but on this day it had been taking up to two hours.

When we got her in the front seat (I was in the backseat with the woman's mother) I asked her how far along she was and she said "nine months today."

I just about died, but I knew we were the only hope of getting this woman to the hospital to have her baby. When we got to Huntington, her contractions were three minutes apart and traffic was gridlocked.

I was thinking, "She's in labor and we're miles from town in a traffic jam and there's no way we can make it before she has this baby." We had radioed the district's emergency-operations center to call ahead to the hospital so that emergency personnel could meet us at the door.

Navigating the traffic was a nightmare because it meant maneuvering across the two narrow lanes all the way to Huntington, and then driving in the turn lane, and occasionally on the shoulder.

I was sitting there comforting our patient and trying to get vital

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Everyone helped where and when they could

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information from her — name, age, address, phone number — and timing her contractions — when I just happened to look out the back window. I had to do a double-take because there were three cars making every move we made and I just about panicked. We're in emergency mode and, to admit it, on a dangerous ride. The pregnant woman's mother told me it was the rest of the family. They had their flashers on and law enforcement was waving them on.

Meanwhile, the district's emergency management coordinator, **Paul Montgomery**, was on the radio relaying information between us and the hospital, which wanted the woman's name.

Paul asked us if we had ever delivered a baby because it looked like that might be the only option.

"I've delivered a lot of calves and a colt and watched two kids be born, but never a baby," David said. I said to David, "Let's just get to the hospital."

In David's words, "We made it to the hospital just in time by barely exceeding the speed limit."

Once the patient was delivered safely to the hospital and taken away in a wheelchair by real medical professionals, David and I sighed relief.

That was just the eventful first 90 minutes of an eight-hour shift. After leaving the hospital, we were dispatched to a Dollar General store parking lot (again on U.S. 69) to assist with gas for a family that had two sick children. The two children had grown weak after more than 26 hours of driving with few necessities. They said there were families with babies and children of all ages sleeping in parking lots on top of and in their vehicles, and on the ground.

People were everywhere. They were exhausted. When we stopped it was hard to get away because more people kept coming. They were depending on us for gas, water, and information. It was difficult to see so many people in such desperate need and with no place and no will to go any farther.

The hours between 3 and 8 a.m. were spent assisting other stranded motorists and evacuees. Just before 6 a.m. we were traveling along Lufkin's East Loop when we came upon 71-year-old Don Crain of Port Arthur who had run out of gas. While driving him back to his vehicle where his wife was nervously waiting, we were flagged down by two young men trying to find a hospital. One of them, Frank Posey, was in excruciating pain from a broken jaw.

They were on one of 54 buses from Beaumont. "His face was really swollen," David said. "I just told them to get in and we'd get them there after we put gas in the man's car. We took the other guy back to the bus before going to the hospital and a woman from one of the buses had been hit by a car."

The woman died.

When we turned that corner, to our surprise, there were hundreds of people from the buses standing along the edge of both sides of the highway and there was bus after bus pulled into driveways and parking lots.

It was very chaotic, scary, and unsafe for them to be there like that. I called the city's emergency-operations center and begged them to find a place for those people.

From there we went on one more rescue to meet a motorist who was diabetic, and low on food and fuel.

"We were on a medical mission to assist stranded motorists who needed gas," David said. "It was scary at times but I wouldn't take anything for the experience, and I wouldn't give anything to do it again."✪

Hurricane evacuee sees things differently

Maintenance Division's **Earl McGlothlin** was one of an estimated two million or more people to participate in the Hurricane Rita evacuation.

He saw it a little differently from some of the other evacuees heard from in the media.

"I traveled to League City to help evacuate my daughter and son-in-law's family and household, since they live in a mandatory-evacuation area," he said. "Even though the 23-hour trip to Austin was an extraordinary event, it was far from remarkable since, according to the papers, about two million other people did it, too."

"The thing I want to comment on," he said, "is the many TxDOT employees we saw on the road at two o'clock in the morning with hard hats and safety vests on, standing in the on-ramps on Interstate 10 so we could safely drive on the wrong side of the road. I would like to offer my sincere thanks for their diligence and attention to duty.

"I know that after an event like this criticism is often directed in many directions, and I just hope that the efforts and sacrifices of all the many hard working and dedicated TxDOT employees during this crisis will not be lost in the shuffle."✪

— by Randy Ormsby, Maintenance Division

Traffic Operations Division handles mapping

Once the evacuations began in earnest, the division's administrative staff handled hundreds of calls from distressed motorists looking for routes or fuel. Some just wanted to know that we were aware of the situation.

We all had maps out trying to find routes or to let callers know where fuel was available. **Judy LeViseur** did her best to reassure callers that help was on the way, in the form of fuel or alternative transportation. Some of the calls were just heart-breaking.

Friday night (Sept. 23) we began developing a re-entry plan for the Houston area including maps, talking points for officials, and fact sheets to help avoid the gridlock and fuel problems of the evacuation.

Eleven people here in Austin worked late into the night to come up with that re-entry map that showed the three-day phased plan. **Jolana Kruse** from the Transportation Planning and Programming Division came in at 9 p.m. Friday to work on these maps and stayed until it was done. She continued to modify the maps throughout the weekend.

Also, all through the week before and after the hurricane, the division worked with the districts on changing the dynamic-message signs throughout the state to direct evacuees to shelter and then to alert them to delays on various roadways.✪

— by Jim Cotton, Traffic Operations Division

Alley names Glenn Hagler MVP in disaster

by Randy Ormsby
Maintenance Division

As TxDOT's emergency management coordinator, **Scott Alley** earned his paycheck during back-to-back hurricanes in late August and September.

Characteristically, Alley downplays his own role — "just doing my job" — and nominates someone else for Most Valuable Player. "What amazed me the most," he recalls, "was how willing TxDOT folks were to help. And the Number One helper, in my opinion, was **Glenn Hagler** (purchasing director, General Services Division)."

"No matter what the state needed him to do, Glenn was up to the challenge," Alley said. "One huge example of how good Glenn is at doing what he does came one morning when Houston needed a diesel-fuel tank set up at the Reliant Center so buses hauling Katrina victims could refuel. That job was first tasked to another state agency at about 10 that morning. They worked and worked the issue and finally called about 6 that evening to say they had located a vendor but had no money to pay for it, so needed TxDOT to issue a purchase order. I called Glenn for help and by midnight, we had a tank sitting on the ground at the Reliant Center," he said.

"Then TxDOT got into the cot-hauling business when the primary agency for materials transportation said they were stretched too thin. Glenn handled a bunch of cots (literally thousands) through the hot-shot trucking contracts and through trucks and drivers from General Services Division. He always knew exactly where to send them, when they would arrive, the points of contact, etc. All he needed was a call from the State Operations Center and — Boom! — he had a truck headed that way," Alley said.

"**Dan Stacks**, assistant director of maintenance in San Antonion District, and **Lowell Choate**, director of maintenance in Austin District, also helped out with hauling cots. Dan's folks hauled cots to Amarillo. But when they arrived, there was no one to help unload, so they had to do it themselves. They had to drive around all over town delivering cots, a few here, a few there. Lowell's driver, **Gary Armijo**, had to buy his own fuel ($132 worth) on the way to the Reliant Center. Plus, his mother had died just the day before, but he didn't mention that when Lowell called looking for volunteers. He just said, "Yes, sir, I'll do it,"' Alley said.

"It was not at all unusual for TxDOT and other agencies or FEMA to be working on the same task," Alley said. "Invariably, TxDOT came through first, often getting things where they needed to go a day or two earlier than FEMA or anyone else."

For his part, Hagler praises his own staff in General Services: "I'm lucky to have a great staff and division personnel to work with," he said. "Although I was the main point of contact for Scott and the state operations center, I had my people here with me and had no problem finding volunteers in the districts to drive trucks, deliver materials, or whatever else needed to be done. Their dedication and willingness to tackle what needs to be done is always an inspiration."✪

Good morning! MAYBE RAIN TONIGHT, HIGH 96, LOW 75 / PAGE 8B CUBS DEAL A BLOW TO ASTROS / PAGE C1

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2005

HURRICANE RITA: BACK TO LIFE

WELCOME HOME

SIGNS that life in Houston was getting back to normal sprang up all over Sunday as restaurants opened and drew big crowds, supermarkets had their aisles quickly filled with shoppers, and area freeways began humming after days of being largely deserted.

CLOSINGS

UTILITIES

GASOLINE

More stories from Hurricane Rita on intranet

More stories about TxDOT's response to the many challenges presented by Hurricane Rita appear on the department's intranet through the Public Information Office. Here's the lineup of stories you will find there. Others may be added later as they become available.

- **Abilene:**
  Volunteer EMS crews help out
- **Brownwood:**
  Crews help with fuel assistance
- **Bryan:**
  Crews help in storm's wake
- **Bryan:**
  Supervisor goes above and beyond
- **Corpus Christi:**
  Baltimore paper details account
- **Houston:**
  Area office recounts stories
- **San Antonio:**
  Team mobilizes for action
- **Waco:**
  Aid given, inspiration received
- **Yoakum:**
  Crews help with signs, clean-up
- **Aviation:**
  Flight Services lends a hand
- **Bridge:**
  Challenges spur repairs
- **Maintenance:**
  Nozzles help delivery of fuel
- **VTR:**
  Evacuation stories unforgettable

TRANSPORTATION NEWS

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