

Combining Resources, Improving Quality of Life

Government agencies across the United States – cities, counties, small municipalities, large cities – all work to improve the quality of life for citizens in their region. Sometimes improvements are difficult to implement or are slow to finalize due to funding or other reasons. No one will argue, however, that safety should be the top priority. Whether your project involves agency employees, residents, or both, it is important to have proper guidelines and information flow to maximize efficiency and keep everyone safe.

The Deep East Texas Council of Governments (DETCOG) has a mission:

“By combining the resources of local government the Deep East Texas Council of Governments provides a window of opportunity for helping citizens improve their quality of life.”

Their focus everyday is working to provide funding, training, mitigation, oversee programs such as emergency management, and more, giving residents the best possible quality of life. DETCOG is a unique association of counties, cities, independent school districts, river authorities, soil and water conservation districts, hospitals districts, even private industry members, in a 12 county region in deep southeast Texas. The association is completely voluntary and operates a wide variety of planning and service programs.

DETCOG’s emergency management assistance has greatly improved preparedness for the region, especially during hurricane evacuations.

Emergency Management

Remember hurricane Rita (September 2005), how about hurricane Ike (September 2008)? So does Texas. Both storms affected southeast Texas, causing disheartening destruction and loss of life. Damages from

hurricane Ike were estimated at over \$20 billion dollars and 112 people were killed in the U.S. as a result of the storm. Living in a hurricane-prone region means facing challenges that other areas of the country do not even have to consider. DETCOG does have to consider these scenarios, and thus, has implemented a network of Travelers Information Stations, also called Highway Advisory Radio, to assist residents during hurricane situations. Highway Advisory Radio, or HAR for short, are radio stations that broadcast messages to motorists using AM radio frequencies. These messages broadcast information about traffic delays, emergency evacuation information, special events, or other non-commercial reports.

Mr. John McDowell, DETCOG's Program Director for Emergency Preparedness /Homeland Security, is leading the effort for implementing HAR systems in Southeast Texas, and knows the importance of communicating critical information to residents. "During a hurricane evacuation [residents] may be stuck in traffic for hours. They need to know where to get fuel, water, medicine, or even where the nearest restroom is located," comments Mr. McDowell. Imagine being trapped on the highway for 18 hours and only moving 10 miles. This can be a reality during a hurricane evacuation.

Mr. McDowell has been working with the state of Texas for 25 years and since 1991 recalls four major hurricane evacuation events affecting the deep east Texas region. Of those four, hurricane Rita holds the lead for the largest number of evacuees with an estimated three million people vacating the coast.

Fixed Sites and Broadcast Data

Phase I of the advisory radio project for DETCOG included the commissioning of eight HAR sites located north of the Golden Triangle. The Golden Triangle is the area between the cities of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange, near the Louisiana border and the Gulf coast. "Our eight sites were placed strategically according to their proximity from the Golden Triangle," states McDowell. Evacuees flee from this region and

eventually need information about shelters, food, water or supplies along the route. “Only three counties have shelters and each serves several thousand people during an evacuation.” The general population shelters within the DETCOG region are located in Lufkin/Angelina County, Nacogdoches/Nacogdoches County, and Center/Shelby County. “The cities and counties work together as shelter hubs for the Houston/Galveston and Golden Triangle evacuees.”

DETCOG chose highway advisory radio equipment manufactured by Vaisala, Inc. Of the eight sites, DETCOG has four on U.S. Highway 59 north of Houston, spread over a 60 mile area, and the other four in nearby counties: Highway 87 in Orange County; Highway 96 in Jasper County; Highway 69 in Tyler County; and Highway 146 out of Houston. Each site is a fixed or permanent advisory radio station, called a Vaisala HIS Highway Advisory Radio, and broadcasts on AM 1670. The sites are integrated with mobile, changeable message signs. The signs flash a message to tune your radio to 1670 AM for information.

The advantage of using a HAR station is that you get 90 seconds of time to relay a message. Changeable roadway signs can only convey a small amount of data, and do not allow for detailed instructions. Broadcasting 90 seconds of information provides plenty of time to explain current weather conditions, estimated travel times, locations of shelters or other detailed instructions for evacuees. During these times it is critical to provide the most information possible to motorists leaving the region. With the HIS Highway Advisory Radio systems, DETCOG can broadcast several messages in a set, and they repeat until new information is recorded. In addition, the sites can be updated quickly as weather or traffic conditions change.

Hurricanes are inevitable in southern Texas and DETCOG is working to provide the best possible way to reach motorists. “The HAR systems disseminate information for evacuees,” states McDowell. If motorists are informed about the situation they feel safer and are more likely to remain calm. This allows Emergency

Management teams to focus on providing shelter assistance, fuel for motorists as necessary, and emergency medical attention.

McDowell adds that DETCOG is planning Phase II of the project, which will include three additional sites - two more on U.S. 59 and another in Jasper County. “The U.S. 59 sites will be placed on the north and south ends, giving us six total sites along the route. The Jasper County site will be synchronized with the existing site in the county and motorists will hear the same message seamlessly throughout this region.”

The Off-Season

DETCOG was able to secure funding for the HAR sites so that local cities or counties could use the sites on a regular basis, namely year round. Since DETCOG is a voluntary association with participation from various community services, it was clear that the HAR sites would serve residents and travelers from all parts of the region. The main purpose of the HAR sites is for emergency management, but the systems can also broadcast information during major traffic accidents (travel times, alternate routes, etc.), safety laws (seat belt), and local events such as flea markets or festivals. “Some of the sites have [general] messages about safety or ‘welcome to our city’, and then are updated as necessary for traffic or emergency broadcasts,” comments McDowell.

With the regional approach and support that DETCOG upholds it made sense for the association to secure funding, and manage the planning and implementation of the advisory radios. Any community service organization participating in the DETCOG program has the option to supply a message for broadcasting non-commercial information to the public.