In Harvey’s wake: looking to the future- and the past

By Claire Goodman

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By the numbers, Hurricane Harvey was the second most devastating natural disaster in the country, surpassed only by Hurricane Katrina. According to statistics from the National Hurricane Center, the storm caused over $125 billion in property damage and claimed the lives of 88 people.

The numbers are so staggering that it’s difficult to comprehend that behind every statistic is a person. The National Hurricane Center estimates that 13 million people were affected by the storm. That 13 million breaks down into destroyed homes, displaced families, lost pets, injuries and even death.

On Aug. 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas. The next day, it tore its way through to the Greater-Houston area.

Two years have passed since the waters receded. As much of the community still continues to rebuild, two questions remain: what are the lessons from Harvey, and what can we do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?

The answer lies as much in the past as it does in the future. In the 1940s, the Army Corps of Engineers published a report warning the government about the potential for a devastating flood. They also created comprehensive mitigations strategies to avoid it.

Due to the onset of World War II, however, only some of the proposed measures were ever completed, and the remaining projects were never resumed. Nearly seven decades later, that inaction would set forth a chain of events that would trap 19 trillion gallons of water in the Greater Houston area, according to meteorologist Ryan Maue of the Cato Institute.

Wendy Duncan is the Director of the Willow Fork Drainage District and co-founder of the Barker Flood Prevention Advocacy Group. She formed the advocacy group immediately following Hurricane Harvey in an effort to insure that the same level of catastrophic destruction is not repeated. Duncan works closely with the Army Corps of Engineers and local government entities to create flood-mitigation plans and keep the public actively informed about those plans.

The main issue in Hurricane Harvey was that the current reservoir infrastructure was woefully insufficient to drain the amount of water that fell during the hurricane. “In essence,” said Duncan, “it’s like trying to drain a bathtub with a coffee straw.”

Unless the government resumes the plans set forth by the Army Corps of Engineers, Duncan warned, Buffalo Bayou will continue to be at risk for a major flood.

Duncan urged the community to learn from Harvey and be the final push to make sure the projects set forth over 70 years ago be completed.

Duncan said, “One thing that people can do is remember. Do not forget this catastrophic event. Don't let it go out of your mind. We need to fix this problem that we have known about for decades.”

She added, “We need to be the generation that finally fixes this problem.”

Duncan maintained, however, that the most important lesson from Harvey was not the drastic need for better infrastructure. For Duncan, it was seeing the community come together to help one another.

“The number one thing to come out of this is just celebrating the amazing community that we are and how quickly we responded to a catastrophic crisis: how quickly churches set up supply centers and volunteers and donations were given. And then we started mucking out homes when the water receded. That is really the amazing story of our community: everyday people who are heroes,” she said.