

Winning the Battle Against High Wind Events

Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana

BELLE CHASSE, LA – Hurricane Isaac’s winds, rain, and flooding were a big test for the new Plaquemines Parish Government Administrative Headquarters. The building, purchased shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, was refitted with exterior storm panels beginning in 2010.

The protective measures were funded with a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). HMGP pays 75 percent on approved projects that will prevent or reduce damage from storms and other natural disasters. These grants are made available for both public and private projects.

Isaac would determine if the measures were effective and if the move to the new headquarters was a good choice.

The verdict?

“We found the storm panels performed as expected. Winds were clocked here in Belle Chasse at 120 mph, and no damage to the areas of the building protected by the storm panels was reported,” said Benny Puckett, parish grant administrator.

Like much of the Gulf Coast, Katrina caused heavy damage in Plaquemines Parish. The low-lying parish straddles the Mississippi River south and east from suburban New Orleans, and juts perilously out into the Gulf of Mexico at the end of the river’s fan-shaped delta. The area is both strategically important for shipping and uniquely vulnerable to hurricanes.

Katrina’s winds and storm surge claimed a number of residential and commercial properties in the area, including the buildings throughout Plaquemines that housed different parish operations and offices. As the parish regrouped, the decision was made to purchase the 35-year-old Popich Building several miles away on the West Bank and centralize most of the departments at the site.

The building’s first floor is an open parking area with two floors above it that have 22,586 square feet of usable space. The building sits on natural high ground close to the Mississippi River.

The building’s entire exterior is glass. Inside it houses an Emergency Operations Center that provides 911 services and the Office of Emergency Preparedness. The office of the parish president is also located at the site. The building’s estimated replacement value is nearly \$3 million with its contents, including emergency communications equipment.

To protect everything, the parish used the HMGP funds to install more than 10,000 linear feet of polycarbonate plastic storm panels on the building’s exterior. The panels provide protection against winds up to 140 mph, are debris resistant, and comply with the 2003 International Building Code. They are delicate enough to transmit light, while possessing enough durability to withstand hurricane-blown debris.



Isaac proved the mitigation measures worked.

“As a matter of fact, the project works so well that plans are in motion to harden 30 additional parish buildings,” added Hilda Lott, Puckett’s assistant. “I have received calls from other parishes inquiring about the performance outcome of our project.”