



Horses Find Safe Haven at State Fairgrounds

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Hillsborough County, Florida



Tampa, FL - Tampa entrepreneur Bob Thomas, with the help of his friend Olin Mott, was determined to create the world's greatest horse show facility. His vision, persistence, and dedication helped create what would become the Bob Thomas Equestrian Center, a world-class venue for horse shows.

The Center, operated by the Florida State Fair Authority under the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, occupies a large portion of the sprawling 317-acre State Fairgrounds in Tampa. Well known by those who are equestrian smart in the U.S. and abroad, it is one of the world's leading horse show grounds. The weeklong Winter Equestrian Festival held there offers more than \$3 million in prize money. The four-day events translate to a \$2 million boost to the local and State economies.

In addition to the equestrian center, the State Fair complex hosts the annual Florida State Fair and a number of trade shows, home shows, and other events. Based on a study conducted by the University of South Florida in fiscal year 2000, annual spending by Fair Authority, employees, event sponsors, and fairground visitors generate more than \$76 million for Hillsborough County.

So what makes this facility so successful? The all-encompassing answer is heart—love of animals in general—and horses in particular. Long-time administrative assistant, Tanya Halvorstod, herself a horse owner, seems to answer for all at the Center. “This is my life,” she said, “and this place is my second home.”

It was this degree of dedication and love of horses that fostered the change from using the center as a shelter of equipment to a horse shelter. With the approach of Hurricane Charley, the Center received many phone calls and inquires from people stopping at the office searching for a place to shelter their horses. In the tradition of the founders, a new role for the Center was fashioned: safe haven for horses under threat of severe weather.

In years past, the county humane society used the horse barns to shelter trucks and other equipment when storms threatened. The manager, Butch Carse, had equipment moved to the show arena, and opened the Center's 471 reinforced concrete, 10 feet by 10 feet stalls, as a safe haven for horses. From Fort Lauderdale to the south and Fort Richey to the north, on a first-come/first-served basis, valuable equines and family “pet horses” soon began to arrive with their grateful owners. Days before Hurricane Charley (2004) struck, the Center was filled to capacity.

Except for a \$15 clean-up fee, there were no charges for the stalls. One horse, known to be skittish, was permitted to share his stall with a favorite companion, a goat. That chemistry didn't work in the 2003 movie *Seabiscuit*, but, in this case, the goat's presence was a tranquilizing influence as storm winds swept across the fairgrounds.

Money cannot measure the affection existing between an owner and a horse. It is unique. An immeasurable loss had been avoided because the shelter was “hardened” to protect the horses. They all came through the storm without a scratch. Only an unsecured, roll-up barn door received damage.

The Equestrian Center at the Florida State Fairgrounds was financed by donations to the Florida State Fair Horse Show Association. In 1977, the Association constructed the barns, rings, tower and pavilion at a cost of approximately \$1,750,000. The Association donated the buildings to the Florida State Fair Authority in 1989 to operate as the Bob Thomas Equestrian Center. No public money was used in the construction or operation of the Center.

As business grows, plans are to construct an additional 300 hurricane-proof stalls for show activity and to protect a larger number of horses from natural disasters.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region IV**

State: **Florida**

County: **Hillsborough County**

City/Community: **Tampa**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**

Hazard Type: **Hurricane/Tropical Storm**

Activity/Project Type: **Retrofitting, Structural**

Activity/Project Start Date: **02/1977**

Activity/Project End Date: **02/1986**

Funding Source: **Private funds**

Funding Recipient: **Property Owner - Commercial**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$1,750,000.00 (Estimated)**

Non FEMA Cost:

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **No**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2004**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.floridadisaster.org/BRM>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/saferoom>

Main Points

- Center has 471 reinforced concrete, 10 feet by 10 feet stalls.
- With the approach of Hurricane Charley (2004), the Center received many phone calls and inquiries from people searching for a place to shelter their horses. A new role for the Center was fashioned: safe haven for horses under threat of severe weather.
- The Center's 471 reinforced concrete, 10 feet by 10 feet stalls were filled to capacity with horses from Fort Lauderdale to the south and Fort Richey to the north. All horses survived Hurricane Charley without a scratch.



Reinforced concrete stalls



Bob Thomas memorial