

THE IKE DIKE: A COASTAL BARRIER PROTECTING THE HOUSTON/GALVESTON REGION FROM HURRICANE STORM SURGE

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ABSTRACT

On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike came ashore near the east end of Galveston Island in Texas. Ike's strong Category 2 winds and near Category 5 equivalent storm surge, created sufficient devastation to be ranked as the third costliest hurricane to make landfall in the United States. Two storm surge barriers that mitigated damage and loss of life in Galveston and were the existing Seawall constructed after the 1900 Galveston storm and the Texas City Barrier constructed after Hurricane Carla. Unlike Hurricane Katrina, when the media and the power of political process focused on the difficulties in New Orleans, the impact of Ike on the Houston/Galveston region was quickly forgotten as attention turned to the US presidential race and the worldwide financial meltdown.

Despite the initial lack of attention, Hurricane Ike may well be a watershed storm. It has already changed how NOAA will classify hurricanes by giving more credence to surge potential. Moreover, the devastation caused by Ike clearly pointed out the vulnerability of the Houston/Galveston area to hurricane storm surge and triggered ideas on regional approaches to suppressing surge for this urbanized region.

One such approach is the "Ike Dike", a coastal barrier that would protect the Houston-Galveston region including Galveston Bay from hurricane storm surge. The project would extend the protection afforded by the existing Galveston Seawall along the rest of Galveston Island and along the Bolivar Peninsula, with a 17ft high revetment near the beach or by raising the coastal highways. The addition of flood gates at Bolivar Roads, the entrance to the Houston, Texas City, and Galveston ship channels, and at San Luis pass on the west end of Galveston Island would complete a coastal spine. At 17ft heights, the Ike Dike approach could provide a barrier against hurricane surges into the Bay for a storm expected to occur every 10,000 years. The coastal spine could be built using existing, proven technology such as the gates and barriers now in use in the Netherlands. However, because the areas needing protection in the Houston Galveston region are above Sea Level, less robust technologies might be needed to achieve the desired protection.

The Ike Dike concept was introduced in early 2009 and local decision-makers quickly began to consider the idea as a possible solution to storm surge in the Gulf Coast region. Harris, Brazoria, Chambers, Galveston, Jefferson and Orange Counties have formed a six-county public corporation, Gulf Coast Community and Recovery District, Inc, for the purpose of mitigating storm surge, flood, and wind damage. The nine directors on the board will consider possible solutions and make recommendations regarding their feasibility. This newly-formed public corporation represents a significant movement towards a coordinated approach to regional storm response and surge protection.