



GOVERNOR GREG ABBOTT

June 30, 2016

Dear Members of the Harris County Delegation:

Thank you for your letter dated May 12, 2016. In your letter, you requested that funds originally appropriated to the Disaster and Deficiency Grants program for emergency disaster response be reallocated to certain local governments for local recovery efforts. Regrettably, due to the minimal funds available for emergency response to any additional disasters that may occur over the remainder of the biennium, we are unable to accommodate your request at this time.

Please be assured the State of Texas is using all available resources to ensure the safety and well-being of citizens across our state. As you are aware, Texas has withstood six presidentially-declared disasters in the past 13 months. These disasters have impacted nearly 60 percent of Texas' counties and a population of over 19 million people. Throughout this time, the Disaster and Deficiency Grant funds have been instrumental in facilitating the state's emergency response efforts that have helped protect life, property and critical infrastructure in affected areas such as Harris County.

Much of the Disaster and Deficiency Grant funds are ultimately provided to local governments such as Harris County. When a local government's existing resources are insufficient to handle the full extent of a disaster in real-time, the local government will often ask the state for assistance. This assistance can take the form of urban search and rescue, swift water rescue, emergency medical, incident management, law enforcement and other emergency personnel, as well as various equipment, high profile vehicles and helicopters with rescue equipment and specially trained personnel.

In addition to these state dollars, our office has asked for and been granted money for recovery efforts in Harris County by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As your letter indicates, FEMA provides both public and individual assistance for recovery efforts. The Government Code spells out in detail the governor's ability to apply for and access these funds. In the aftermath of recent disasters, this office has requested both public and individual assistance on behalf of Harris County and its residents. Just yesterday, FEMA granted individual assistance to Harris County for the May weather event.

Unfortunately, the funds remaining in the Disaster and Deficiency Grants program may not be sufficient for additional emergency operations that may be necessary to respond to future disasters during the remainder of the current biennium. Even under the most optimistic of FEMA reimbursement scenarios, the fund balance is a fraction of what would be needed for critical emergency response efforts for a minor hurricane or significant flood event. Importantly, the current balance was meant to last through August 2017, and yet the 2016 hurricane season is only now beginning. As a result, sufficient funds are not available to augment recovery efforts in Harris County — or the many other parts of the state that have been struck by a disaster.

The low balance is due in large part to a reduction in the amounts appropriated by the legislature to the Disaster Fund last biennium. During the 84th Legislative Session, the Governor's Office requested \$63.3 million for the Disaster Fund for the current biennium (\$33.7 million for FY 2016 and \$29.6 million for FY 2017), along with the authority to spend any unexpended balances from the prior biennium. The original version of the House budget would have appropriated only \$24.8 million to this program for the entirety of the current biennium — without the ability to spend unexpended balances (See page I-62 and I-66 of House Bill 2 as-filed draft). Despite numerous conversations with representatives from both the House and Senate, the final budget for this biennium appropriated a net amount of just \$14.8 million to the Disaster and Deficiency Grants program (\$24.8 million minus \$10 million to fund grants for local law enforcement to finance body cameras pursuant to Senate Bill 158), plus the ability to spend unexpended balances totaling more than \$67 million. In the end, the Disaster Fund was appropriated \$48.5 million less than the Governor's Office requested.

Past legislatures have chosen to appropriate supplemental funds above and beyond the life-saving and disaster-mitigation funds appropriated for disaster response efforts — even specifying an amount of recovery funds dedicated to recovery efforts in disaster areas. That method has the added benefit of being able to address recovery efforts on a statewide basis rather than on an ad hoc basis.

Given the low amount of funds remaining in the Disaster Fund, and the prudence of addressing recovery efforts on a statewide basis, we are not able to expend additional Disaster Fund money on recovery efforts in Harris County. We look forward to visiting with you and the rest of your colleagues next session regarding this matter.

Sincerely,



Robert Allen
Deputy Chief of Staff
Office of the Governor

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