

Hurricane Ike Preservation Case Study



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HURRICANE IKE IMPACT REPORT

PRESERVATION CASE STUDY - City Works to Restore Community Character

Storm History

1900 – Galveston
Hurricane

1961 – Hurricane Carla

1983 – Hurricane Alicia

2008 – Hurricane Ike

The catastrophic 1900 Hurricane remains the deadliest natural disaster to ever strike the United States. It is estimated that 8,000 human lives were lost during the storm. That event was equally destructive to Galveston’s economy and infrastructure. Extensive ruin to the major icons and emblems of Galveston caused a community-wide identity crisis, depleting morale and hope for the devastated city. The 1900 Hurricane also decimated plant life on Galveston Island. In the twelve years following that storm, more than 10,000 trees and 2,500 oleanders were planted along Galveston esplanades and thoroughfares. Those century-old trees continued to grow, ornamenting the streets and Victorian era buildings they shaded. The trees became a living part of Galveston’s character, one that connected current Galvestonians with their roots. More importantly, the scenic tree-lined streets and historic downtown district termed “The Strand” had become cornerstones to one of Galveston’s main industries: tourism.

Case Facts

Hurricane Ike struck Galveston Island in September of 2008. Flooding from Ike’s storm surge resulted in devastation to the distinctive trees and buildings that had been present on the island for a century or longer.



City officials estimated that up to 11,000 trees on public property and as many as 31,000 trees on private property would die as a result of the storm. Eighty-percent of Galveston’s East-end trees would need to be cut down. Officials from Galveston’s historic preservation office estimated that some of the city’s nineteenth-century buildings had more than eight feet of flooding and that of the 7,000 documented historic properties, at least 1,500 were seriously damaged.

Key Decisions

Galveston lost 40,000 trees due to Hurricane Ike

1,500 historic properties were severely damaged

It was initially thought that some of the old oak trees might recover if their roots were regularly soaked with fresh water and gypsum was applied to the soil. This process ultimately failed, and forestry officials were forced to begin cutting 40,000 of the once majestic trees down to stumps. They were met with resistance. Galvestonians fixed black ribbons and sentimental poems to the trees that seemed to be such an integral part of their home. Sensitive to the effects of the systematic tree-cutting, city officials refrained from cutting down the trees lining Broadway, Galveston's entrance and main thoroughfare, until the end because it was thought that removal of those trees would have the greatest emotional impact on residents.

It was necessary to educate the citizens on the hazard posed by the dead and dying trees. In addition to the risk of dead trees and tree limbs falling on citizens, in the event of another storm, dead trees would be easily uprooted and become projectiles in the violent wind. Galveston residents were upset that trees that sprouted leaves were being cut down in addition to the obviously dead ones. However, the trees that seemed to be sprouting were, in truth, very nearly dead and needed to be removed.

However, Galveston's is not a story of death, but of rebirth and renewal. Even while the trees were being cut, plans were made to preserve some of the legacy of the historic oaks. Sculpture artists were invited to carve the stumps left behind from some of massive trees. In this way, Galveston's celebrated trees live on for the public to enjoy.



While efforts to replant trees in Galveston began the year before, in November 2010, the City of Galveston in partnership with Galveston Island Tree Conservancy and the Texas Forest Service released *Galveston ReLeaf: A Strategic Plan for Replanting*. The forty-four page document outlined reasons to plant, planting tactics as well as a timeline for replanting. They plan to fully

“ReLeaf” Galveston’s public and private property through municipal planting programs; tree giveaways to private business, churches and residents.

Galveston Releaf, a partnership between the Galveston Island Tree Conservancy and the Texas Forest Service outlines a plan 25,000 trees in 5 years

In addition to the trees, officials were pressed to save and restore Galveston’s nineteenth-century historic buildings. The facades of many of Galveston’s historic buildings are made of cast-iron, and the salt-water from the storm surge severely compromised them. In 2009, the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed The Strand’s cast-iron facades as one of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Then-Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas took up the call and secured \$750,000 to rehabilitate historic building facades in The Strand, one of Galveston’s oldest and most popular tourist destinations.

Conclusions

For her efforts in restoring The Strand, Mayor Thomas was honored with a National Preservation Award in 2010. The Strand’s Victorian era buildings that house shops and cafes are hallmarks of the tourism industry, and preserving those recognizable buildings is another crucial step in preserving Galveston’s character.

Few events exemplify Galveston’s ability to move forward and create beauty out of wreckage more than the story of its oaks. The trees were planted as a part of the recovery effort after the devastating 1900 storm, only to be themselves destroyed by a crushing hurricane a century later.

Galveston ReLeaf outlines a plan for planting 25,000 new trees on Galveston Island in five years. With that accomplished, Galveston’s old arbors will be fully replaced, but not forgotten. The older, historic oaks now dot Galveston streets, parks and yards as carvings that exemplify both Galvestonian quirkiness and beauty, and soon the new trees will be planted to grow around them as the cycle of restoration on Galveston Island continues.

