

Palm Beach Post: FEMA to refund Martin \$3.4 million

By Jason Schultz

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

September 21, 2007

STUART - Martin County on Thursday won a three-year fight with the federal government over \$3.4 million in hurricane cleanup money.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency agreed to reimburse the county for the cost of clearing debris from private streets after the 2004 hurricanes. The agency had turned down two appeals by the county before approving the money.

"We've been almost like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. We've been rebuffed time and time again," Martin County Administrator Duncan Ballantyne said. "This is where some grit and determination paid off."

The county spent \$19 million clearing debris from roads after Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne, County Engineering Administrator Don Donaldson said. Although FEMA reimbursed the county for most of that expense, the agency refused to pay for cleanup on streets within gated communities and private roads.

Donaldson said the county argued that FEMA had a responsibility to clean all roads.

"We always knew we had a good case," he said.

Earlier this year, County Commissioner Doug Smith asked federal lawmakers to intercede on the county's behalf. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, met twice with FEMA Director David Paulson to make the county's case before the agency agreed to the reimbursement, said Mahoney's spokeswoman, Jessica Santillo.

Smith said the work of Mahoney and others, including Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar, made the difference for the county.

FEMA officials could not be reached for comment Thursday.

The money couldn't come at a better time for Martin County, Ballantyne said. Commissioners passed a \$394 million budget Wednesday night that includes a \$6.3 million reduction in property tax revenues.

The county also is expecting a \$2 million to \$3 million shortfall in its sales tax revenues this year, which the new FEMA money could help offset, Ballantyne said.

Commission Chairman Michael DiTerlizzi said most of the money probably will go into emergency reserves, but he also would like to see some of it used to promote economic development in Martin County.

Assistant County Administrator Taryn Kryzda said the county's general reserve fund without the new FEMA money will be about \$11 million next year, depending on the amount of the sales tax shortfall.

Santillo did not know when the money would be sent to Martin County.

St. Lucie County also has filed two appeals seeking \$2.2 million in reimbursement for 2004 storm cleanup on private roads. Santillo said Mahoney is working to get FEMA to agree to that reimbursement.