

Palm Beach Post: FEMA will see you now

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U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, had to take the unusual step of meeting with FEMA Director David Paulison recently to find out why the agency still owed Martin County \$3.2 million for debris removal from Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne in 2004.

One meeting, however, wasn't enough. Rep. Mahoney had to visit Mr. Paulison a second time to finally get the money released to the county, 3 1/2 years after the hurricanes hit. Rep. Mahoney also was able to talk the Federal Emergency Management Agency into releasing another \$1.7 million in reimbursements that also covered expenses from Hurricane Wilma in 2005. FEMA is acting like an insurance company that fights every claim, and then holds onto the check as long as possible.

Though the checks are late coming, their arrival is still timely as Martin County and other local governments in Florida confront the budget cuts mandated by the property tax amendment. The federal money held hostage within the FEMA bureaucracy could provide significant relief to counties and cities that are looking for any economic stimulus they can find.

Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties are also waiting. After the 2004 storms, emergency planners identified 55 projects around Palm Beach County to harden public buildings and improve storm drainage. To date, roughly half of the \$33 million in improvements is approved and moving forward. "It is a struggle to get things done," said Butch Truesdale, an emergency management planner. "The costs of the projects keep going up while we're trying to get FEMA's approval." In some cases, by the time FEMA gets around to approving a claim, costs have risen so much that negotiations have to start over.

St. Lucie County is hoping to get \$7.5 million in reimbursements to finish building a special-needs shelter. The county has tried twice to get reimbursed for \$2.1 million in private debris removal from 2004, but FEMA has denied both requests. Assistant County Administrator Faye Outlaw says the county is going to try a new strategy: "We have contacted Congressman Mahoney's office."

Rep. Mahoney deserves credit for his persistence and results. These, though, are worthy, well-documented claims for reimbursement that should not require congressional intervention and two meetings with the FEMA director to resolve. Mr. Paulison may be an improvement over Michael Brown, but as long as FEMA remains part of the bureaucratic behemoth that is the Department of Homeland Security, these impasses are inevitable. While they go on, governments may be needlessly strapped for cash.

Get FEMA out of Homeland Security. But first, get these counties their money.