



Austwell: A Small Town With Big Plans

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Refugio County, Texas

Refugio County, TX – Austwell, a tiny Gulf Coast town with a population of 200, has big plans to survive hurricanes.



In July 2003, Austwell suffered extensive damage when Hurricane Claudette ravished homes and businesses in the city. Now the unpaid mayor and a building official have joined forces to adopt and enforce strict building codes.

“To protect lives and property from natural disasters, we adopted the International Building Codes as the municipal building code for all construction, alteration, remodeling, enlargement, and repair of any residential and commercial structures within the municipality,” said Earl Bluhm, building official. The codes are recommended by the Texas Department of Insurance.

Individuals seeking to build or renovate a home in Austwell must have their plans reviewed by a wind-storm engineer. Construction must meet the code for 125-miles-per-hour wind.

“We require that you hire a wind-storm engineer who is approved by the state of Texas,” Bluhm said. “I inspect building for the city of Austwell. I will not issue you a permit to build until your plans are reviewed by the engineer.”

New construction also must be elevated at least a foot above the street. “The city is virtually flat. There’s only a 23-inch differential from the highest to the lowest point,” Bluhm said. “If you build at least a foot higher than the street you should never have a flooding problem.”

Situated on a bluff 25 feet above sea level, the town is relatively safe from storm surge.

“There is another hazard that led to flooding in 2007,” Bluhm said. Area farming is creating small dams as well as causing ditches to overflow. The local hazard mitigation plan has been revised, and a request for federal assistance has been made to address this issue.

“We recognized that this was going to be a problem. Rather than take pot shots and waste money, we got an engineer to survey elevations of ditches and culverts and to make recommendations,” said Thomas Bernal, mayor of Austwell. “We know what we need to do. Now it’s a matter of funding to implement the projects.”

Bluhm surveys the condition of existing homes and gives advice on bringing them into voluntary compliance or tearing them down. “Mr. Bluhm means business. He doesn’t show favoritism” Bernal said. “I received a letter requesting that I tear down my mother’s unoccupied residence.”

If owners do not comply, city officials will remove the building and place a lien on the property for costs incurred. “Eight buildings have already been condemned,” Bluhm said.

Compliance has been met with some obstacles. “One of the difficulties that we have encountered with enforcing building codes is that people who have lived here all their life do not want to accept change. They are used to building whatever they want and however they want to build it,” said Bernal. “It’s difficult for them to accept the fact that building smarter and stronger will cost them 20-30 percent more. Mr. Bluhm is diligent about bringing them into compliance.”

Says Bluhm “I go strictly by the book. If you build without adhering to the codes you will never get power or water. That’s the only hold we have.”

Overall, Bernal is confident about the outcome. “We’re getting it cleaned up. We are on the coast and we’re strengthening the town. We are trying to keep up with the times and put a fresh face on Austwell. We have repaired a whole bunch of houses,” Bernal said. “If a category two or three hurricane comes through, we are going to look golden. We are enforcing these codes. It’s for the benefit of the residents.”

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region VI**

State: **Texas**

County: **Refugio County**

City/Community: **Austwell**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

Hazard Type: **Severe Storm; Hurricane/Tropical Storm**

Activity/Project Type: **Building Codes**

Structure Type: **Masonry, Reinforced; Metal Building**

Activity/Project Start Date: **06/2005**

Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**

Funding Source: **Homeowner; Property Owner, Commercial; Property Owner, Residential**

Funding Recipient: **Property Owner - Residential**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Unknown**

Value Tested By Disaster? **No**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/hmgp/index.shtm>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/nhp/index.shtm>

Main Points

- In July 2003, Austwell suffered extensive damage when Hurricane Claudette ravished homes and businesses in the city.
- As a result, stricter building codes are in effect. They adopted International Building Codes as the municipal building code for all construction, alteration, remodeling, enlargement, and repair of any residential and commercial structures within the municipality. The codes are recommended by the Texas Department of Insurance.
- Individuals seeking to build or renovate a home in Austwell must have their plans reviewed by a wind-storm engineer. Construction must meet the code for 125-miles-per-hour wind.
- New construction also must be elevated at least a foot above the street.
- If owners do not comply, city officials will remove buildings and place a lien on the properties for costs incurred. If you build without adhering to the codes you will never get power or water.
- Although not yet tested, officials are confident that if a category two or three hurricane comes through, they will be fine.



Picture of the mayor and building official in office building



Office of the Major and Building Official located in Austwell, Texas