

Parish says 'thank you'

BY WILLIAM JOHNSON • WJOHNSON@DAILYWORLD.COM • SEPTEMBER 11, 2008

As of Wednesday, all shelters and all emergency distribution locations in St. Landry Parish were closed and life was slowly returning to normal following a devastating visit by Hurricane Gustav.

While the disaster may have brought out the worst in nature, officials said it also brought out the best in the parish's residents.

"All of our mayors, all of our first responders, everyone came together as a team," said Parish President Don Menard. "When it came time to help, everyone put their personal differences aside. It is an honor to serve these people."

Menard praised many people and businesses but gave his highest praise to St. Landry EMS and Opelousas Fire Chief Lee Cahanin.

"I can't thank St. Landry EMS enough. Even during the height of the storm they were helping us out, getting people out of damaged homes and into shelters. They even had one paramedic who rode in the back of a dump truck to rescue people. There was no charge for anything. Everything we asked, they did, no questions asked," Menard said.

While Cahanin is Opelousas' fire chief, Menard said that during the disaster, he also took on the job of coordinating relief supplies for the entire parish.

"You don't have to ask Lee, he just comes forward. He is always there when we needed him," Menard said.

During the storm and its aftermath, Cahanin helped coordinate the delivery and distribution of 22 truckloads and two helicopter loads of supplies totaling about 400,000 pounds of ice, 100,000 cases of water, thousands of tarps and \$1.3 million worth of military rations.

Cahanin himself was full of praise for still others. He said many individuals and businesses stepped up to help get the supplies to the people from local police and firefighters to the National Guard and teams of trustees from the parish jail.

Many businesses also helped keep the relief lines moving. Cahanin said the National Guard would bring in the truckloads of supplies, but they would often leave them on the site.

"Ventura Foods sent us a yard dog to move the empty trailers out so we could get more in. Dixie Trucking sent us a tractor to help. Bodemuller The Printer and St. Landry Lumber let us have forklifts to help unload the trucks," Cahanin said. "Almost everyone we called on responded. They were happy to help."

Cahanin also praised the Leonville, Sunset, Krotz Springs and Palmetto volunteer fire departments for coordinating distributions in their area.

In terms of emergency supplies, Parish Administrative Director Jessie Bellard said many of the municipalities even unselfishly reassigned some of their supplies to neighboring communities with greater needs.

"The overall cooperation was unbelievable," Ballard said.

Opelousas Mayor Donald Cravins Sr. said everyone in his city stepped up the plate as well. "Our police did a magnificent job, our fire department, everyone who worked did a magnificent job," Cravins said.

While he is often a critic of Cleco, the city's power supplier, he even had praise for that company. "Every call I put in got answered. In fairness to the people on the ground, you did your job and you did it well," Cravins said.

For his part, Opelousas Police Chief Perry Gallow gave praise to Super One foods, which donated a truckload of ice that was distributed by store's employees and members of the Opelousas Police Department

"The police department used this load of ice to reach out to citizens who did not have the resources to take advantage of the drive thru distribution point at Donald Gardner Stadium," Gallow said.

Lisa Vidrine, the parish's emergency preparedness director, gave special praise to Holy Ghost Catholic Church, which opened its doors to serve as the parish shelter for at times up to 150 people. "I want to especially thank Reggie Tatum, Father Jason and the numerous volunteers who worked at the shelter facility," Vidrine said.

She thanked the St. Landry Parish School Board and its employees and bus drivers who provided evacuation services and Gennuso's Fuel Supply for keeping emergency responders supplied with fuel during the emergency.

"Everyone helped. Wal-mart Distribution Center was there when we needed supplies for the shelter. Coca-Cola Bottling and Anheuser-Busch provided water at our POD sites. Yoo-Hoo Inc. and employees provided juice and applesauce to those in need," Vidrine said.

She also thanked state Rep. Elbert Guillory and Sen. Donald Cravins Jr. as well as national Congressman Charles Boustany and Senator David Vitter for helping cut through the red tape to get emergency help into the parish.

Guillory also took on another job after the storm, becoming a cowboy for several days, helping to round up dozens cattle that had escaped their pens during the storm.

Vidrine also gave praise to the St. Landry Parish Community Action Agency for transportation, the St. Landry Parish Solid Waste Disposal District, the E-911 Communications District and its dispatchers, the St. Landry-Evangeline United Way, Acadiana Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Yambilee Association, the Opelousas Housing Authority and the Opelousas Boys and Girls Club.

"This is certainly not a complete list," Vidrine said. "I just want to say thank you to everyone who lent a helping hand to St. Landry Parish in the response and recovery to Hurricane Gustav. We could not have done it without the cooperation and assistance from our wonderful community."