

Mitigation best practices



FEMA

Quick reopening of supermarket served Galveston citizens

Seawall, structural measures, last-minute prep protected Kroger

At a glance

The beachfront Signature Kroger Grocery Store in Galveston survived Hurricane Ike with minimal damage and reopened in only 3.5 days because of pre-disaster hazard mitigation, preparation and commitment to serve the community.

GALVESTON, Texas — In the wee hours of Saturday, Sept. 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike barreled ashore as a strong Category 2 storm, bringing wind gusts up to 125 mph and a storm surge that spilled over the 17-foot-high Galveston seawall.

The disaster shut down the island for many long days thereafter. But a bright spot beckoned in the landscape of destruction. Next to the seawall, one grocery store reopened in only 3.5 days. For many more days, townspeople could find few other sources of food and essential provisions.

“I have talked to probably 400 of our regular customers, and they say this store was their only ray of normal reality,” said Tom Herring, manager of the Signature Kroger Grocery Store at 5730 Seawall Blvd., shortly after the storm. “They could come in and enjoy air conditioning, get hot food, get away from their daily trouble for a couple of hours before going back to start cleaning again.”



Photo courtesy of Signature Kroger Grocery Store

Kroger's grocery in Galveston opened quickly after Hurricane Ike because of hazard-mitigation actions.

How did the store do it? Herring said, “We were able to survive the storm with very minimal damage and to reopen quickly because of many things that we did before, during and after the storm.”

The building sits on a prized though precarious spot along the Gulf of Mexico behind the seawall. On a peaceful day, beyond the seawall, silver-blue and white waves lap lazily on the sandy beach. The site, previously occupied by a mobile home park, is so

alluring that it is hard to imagine what happened when the sea turned into a monster during Hurricane Ike.

“If that seawall wasn't there, we wouldn't be standing here today,” Herring said. “It did its job of keeping the majority of the water at least off the properties where there is a seawall.” Some of the surge came over the seawall, which is considerably higher than the popular frontage businesses, including Kroger.



Signature Kroger grocery store, Galveston, Texas.

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Hearing explained that the store, built in 2000, “was designed to have water roll to the left and the right, so the store wouldn’t be impacted so much.”

He also said, “When they built this store, they brought in extra fill to raise the lot, built up more on a concrete pad and raised the store quite a bit. We have a disaster plan, but everything hinges on the physical structure of the building, whether anything survives or not.”

The sturdy masonry structure complied with all building codes when the structure was built, said David Ewald, City of Galveston building official. In fact, the structure was built more than two feet above the height required by floodplain regulations, according to Kroger officials.

Kroger’s staff conducted a blitz of preparedness activities before the storm hit. “We had shutters on all our windows — which were already protected by a masonry-columned promenade — sandbagged the doors and put heavy pallets of merchandise on our bay doors to keep them from blowing in,” Hearing said. “What we did is like the normal precautions you would do at your house before a storm, but on a little larger scale.

“So when we opened the door to check things out on Monday after the storm, there was no water in the store, and very minimal roof damage; a few small leaks, hardly any damage at all to the store,” Hearing said.

There was, of course, no power. The store, which usually serves about 3,500 customers a day, started the cleanup with a backup generator run by natural gas, but the service was unreliable because of the many disruptions in the system. So management brought in two additional generators to handle the load. The store geared up to reopen with 30 management people flown in from other Kroger stores, potable water and emergency supplies.

“We threw away every single perishable item in the store — even those that were in the vault and still frozen,” Hearing said. “Hard goods are not that big a deal when it comes to reopening after a storm, but when it comes to selling groceries — food preparation, meat, refrigerated goods, frozen foods — you have to have water and electricity. And Kroger is so food-safety minded that every perishable thing had to be thrown out.”

“The Galveston officials, including the mayor, were extremely helpful in allowing us access to the store,” said Gary Huddleston, director of Kroger Community Affairs Division. “We were able to move associates and product into Galveston quickly to serve the first responders and residents.”

Hearing said Kroger will examine the Galveston experience to determine what was done well and what could have been done better, and the company will use this as a model for future disaster planning.

“It cost a lot to reopen so quickly,” Hearing said. “The main reason why Kroger opened up was not for the profit or loss from the business. I can tell you we opened up because our president and our regional manager and the staff here said, ‘We need to help meet the needs of the community.’

“Does that make sense? We did a lot, and we did it because we wanted to take care of this community. You really can’t put a price tag on that.”



Tom Hearing, Manager, Kroger’s grocery, Galveston, Texas.

Story and Photos by Ann Patton - FEMA