

Testimony of I.M. Shelton to the Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on Oversight of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Response to the Baton Rouge Flood Disaster

The City of Central, Louisiana is a 62 square mile municipality located 20 minutes north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The City of Central currently has a population of 27,947 people and 11,176 households.

On August 11th, 2016, a tropical weather system began that dropped more than 30 inches of rain in less than 72 hours on the City of Central, triggering a wide spread flooding event throughout the city and Southeast Louisiana. On August 14, 2016 the rivers that serve as the boundaries for the city rose to record breaking levels. The Amite River at Denahm Springs crested 46.20ft, breaking the record of 1983 by 5ft. The Comite River at Joor Rd crested 34.22ft, breaking the 2001 record by 4ft. An estimated 80% of the households and 10% of the businesses sustained damage from the flooding. The chance of a weather system such as this was less than 0.1%. This 1000-year weather system dropped three times the amount of rain as Hurricane Katrina. This weather system caused the worst natural disaster that this community has ever witnessed.

However, the people of this community are resilient. Once the waters receded, people were working hard to remove all flood-damaged materials from their homes and preparing to rebuild. Within a week of the flood, citizens were ready to start the permitting and rebuilding process. As a government, we were ready to procure contracts for debris removal to clean our city.

We worked with both the Louisiana State Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) and the East Baton Rouge Parish's Mayor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (MOSHEP) to address basic questions, but there are certain questions and decisions that only FEMA can answer. FEMA's response to this disaster has caused incredible frustration. As Mayor of Central, I had no liaison or point of contact for FEMA for the 21 days following the disaster. As a local municipality, we had no choice, but to establish plans for recovery efforts to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens without guidance or assistance from FEMA. The complexity of the rules and regulations for procurement wasted hours of precious time. We sorted through processes and worked with GOHSEP to gain clarity on what would be deemed as acceptable by FEMA in order to be reimbursed. The first few meetings that were hosted by MOHSEP for the mayors of the region were the only interaction with FEMA officials that our organization had during the first two weeks of this ordeal. However, those meetings still left us with confusion and unanswered questions. When contact was finally established with liaison for our city, she was still unable to answer any questions that we had or offer explanations and insight.

FEMA's response, or lack there of, has proven that the entity as a whole is inept, inconsistent, and disorganized. It was quickly apparent that the FEMA staff in our area had a lack of training and knowledge about the FEMA rules and regulations. The majority of the staff we have spoken to stated that they were brand new to the job with only 72 hours of training. Additionally, FEMA has a high turn over rate in the people on the ground. It has become common knowledge that your first interaction with a FEMA employee is more than likely to be your last with that same employee. In a disaster of this magnitude, it is important to establish consistent contacts

and relationships as people are attempting to navigate the extremely complex FEMA process. The Mobile Disaster Recovery Center, although useful in theory, became another source of confusion and frustration. People go to those DRCs looking for answers that they cannot find through any other means. Yet again, they are faced with more inconsistencies and lack of compassion when arriving at these centers. Citizens are given standard, template answers at best that give very little clarity.

When the regional FEMA leadership suggested that we host a town hall meeting, with FEMA representation in attendance, we were elated to perhaps finally get some clear answers to our citizens. However, as the FEMA representatives arrived to the meeting, they informed us that they were not given any directives as to what was the purpose of their presence at the Town Hall discussion and what role they were to play. The unprofessionalism and disorganization is astounding and would never be tolerated in the private sector. Twelve hundred citizens of the community attended that town hall discussion and left with added confusion and frustration. The Town Hall Meeting was the first indication anyone had received that they may be required to go through a substantial damage analysis and may be required to elevate, relocate or demolish their homes. As the local government, we had not received any instructions or official information on what that process entailed. This lack of communication and clear understanding created unnecessary fear and confusion among the community. With approximately 4000 residences sustaining flood damage that were located in a floodplain, the residents and businesses alike were in a panic about the future viability of the community. The trickle-down effect is potentially catastrophic. Residents are already contemplating abandoning their homes and businesses are considering permanent closures all due to the fact that there is no consistency or clarity on forced federal regulations that can potentially be ruinous to a community. Abandonment and blight would be the least of our worries. In a small, rural community like Central, every residence and every business is vital to the health of the economy. The loss of tax revenues will have a profound affect on our education system, first responders, and any other service that the municipality provides to the citizens.

Although residents are told that the max payout that FEMA will make is \$33,000, the average payout is significantly lower in most disasters, averaging around \$5300. As a community, to be faced with the majority of the residents losing everything they owned, getting denials and minimal payouts is infuriating, especially when also faced with the possibility of having substantial damage with no real hope of additional help. The Community Development Block Grant that possibly may come a year later at best, after an arduous battle at the local level, offers no real hope to individuals that are faced with this scenario. Additionally, the process for receiving temporary housing assistance creates more exasperation for people who are given ridiculous responses to applications for temporary housing. The FEMA rule that temporary mobile home units cannot be placed in a floodplain, is preposterous when you have 4000 residences with flood damage, located in a flood plain. Each disaster should be assessed individually to waive such bureaucratic regulations, when it would be impossible otherwise to absorb 4000 households in the community in any other way. Keeping people close to their homes reduces crime and expedites the rebuilding process. Common sense measures must be implemented for the overall benefit to a community.

For a nation to send billions of dollars overseas in federal aid, yet make its own citizens fight, plead, and beg for assistance is incomprehensible. FEMA does act as an agency that is there in the midst of a disaster to help. FEMA is there to impede the progress of recovery at each and every step. Inconsistency, lack of flexibility, lack of compassion, and lack of knowledge is completely unacceptable for an organization of this nature.

From: Marx, William William.Marx@mail.house.gov
Subject: Oversight Committee Hearing Update
Date: September 7, 2016 at 9:20 AM
To: Jr.Shelton@central-la.gov
Cc: Howell, Mike Mike.Howell@mail.house.gov

Good Morning,

The start time for the “Oversight of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Response to the Baton Rouge Flood Disaster.” hearing has been rescheduled for **8:30 a.m.** this Friday. This change reflects a minor conflict with Member’s schedules. I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause, please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,
Willie

Willie Marx
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
(202) 225-5074 | 2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Rep. Jason Chaffetz, Chairman

I.M. SHELTON, JR.
MAYOR OF THE CITY OF CENTRAL, LA

Mr. Shelton was elected to office of Mayor of the City of Central for a term beginning in July of 2014. He is a lifelong resident of East Baton Rouge Parish and has lived in Central for 38 years. Married to his high school sweetheart, they have 4 children and 7 grandchildren.

Mayor Shelton is a 1973 graduate of Louisiana State University with a BS in Business Administration. Prior to being elected Mayor, he was a successful local realtor and a small business owner for 30 years. His background includes extensive leadership roles as an Associate Member of the local homebuilders association, his home church and various business organizations.

As Mayor, he has put a strong emphasis on development and economic growth. Mayor Shelton believes in involvement of all the people, with differing views, and different passions in order to come to the right decisions for his city.