

BUILD IT FORWARD:

Community Feedback about Harvey Recovery



CITY OF HOUSTON
SUMMARY OF COMMENTS RECEIVED ON
HOUSTON'S LOCAL ACTION PLAN FOR HOUSING RECOVERY
JUNE 26, 2018



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MESSAGE FROM TOM McCASLAND



Houstonians have a right to have a say in their recovery from Hurricane Harvey. That's why I charged our team at the Housing and Community Development Department (HCDD) to think big about engaging Houston's diverse communities in new ways.

Since May 19, HCDD has convened 18 public meetings on long-term housing recovery. More than 800 Houstonians attended these events in person, and another 700+ participated in an online survey. More than 3,000 attended a tele-townhall co-hosted with the AARP of Texas. This outreach represents HCDD's biggest-ever community engagement effort.

We knew that we couldn't reach this many Houstonians on our own – we needed the help of community organizations and elected officials to co-host events with HCDD. We appreciate the partnership of City Council members, super neighborhoods, civic clubs, and community organizations who stepped up to organize so many meetings on a very short timeline.

I attended most of these meetings, and I heard first-hand how the storm continues to impact Houstonians. Whether you are a homeowner or a renter, whether you live in an area that flooded badly, or one that didn't flood at all, Harvey has left its mark.

I heard from so many people who shared their stories of struggle and survival. All of them want a better city that's better prepared for the next storm. While I know we have work to do to build trust in government as a partner in recovery, I also heard from people that they want to see more of this kind of engagement. We are listening, and we will be back.

We need strong partners outside of government to help make this the best recovery it can be. We're counting on outside advocates, academics, and policy organizations to hold us accountable and bring us the best thinking about how to use housing recovery funds.

Houston has the potential to be a leader in taking on the housing affordability and equity crises that face so many large cities today. With these recovery dollars, we hope to realize an ambitious vision of a city where everyone has an affordable place to live, in a neighborhood where they can thrive.

Together, we can build forward as one city.

— Tom McCasland
Director, Housing and Community Development Department

OVERVIEW

As soon as the State of Texas published its Action Plan for \$5 billion for housing recovery at the end of April, Houston started reaching out to communities impacted by Harvey. The purpose of our community engagement was to educate the public and receive input about how to spend Houston's share of the funds.

Houston's Housing and Community Development Department (HCDD) worked with the **University of Houston Community Design and Resource Center** and **[bc] Workshop** to assist in designing an accessible methodology for engaging diverse communities. HCDD also convened a series of four planning meetings with community-based groups to discuss how best to reach their constituents.

For the first time, HCDD partnered with outside organizations, including civic clubs, Super Neighborhoods, City Council Members, and advocacy organizations in its community engagement for Harvey recovery. The goal of this approach was to increase participation and reach.

Prior to Harvey, housing advocates emphasized residents' "right to have a say" in what happens in their neighborhoods. Groups called on HCDD to expand participation and transparency about its programming and planning processes. Harvey recovery presented an opportunity to respond to this feedback at scale and with speed.

In May and June 2018, HCDD worked with partners to convene 17 public meetings, 8 focus groups, and give 7 presentations. In just two months, more than 800 Houstonians attended a public meeting, and 746 participated in an online survey. More than 3,000 people dialed in to a tele-townhall co-hosted with AARP, designed to reach seniors and others who may have had challenges attending an in-person meeting. This is **HCDD's biggest-ever community engagement effort**.

Success in community engagement isn't just a numbers game – we need to **share what we learned**, and **how the engagement informs our approach**. The feedback received in the meetings and through the survey is summarized in this document, including an analysis of the priority voting conducted at the meetings. We engaged the **University of Texas School of Public Health, Center for Health Promotion and Prevention Research** to produce the priorities analysis.

We know we have more to do to carry this kind of engagement forward into long-term recovery. This summer, we will continue to engage residents, experts, and practitioners in the development of **program guidelines** that contain the details of how recovery programs will operate.



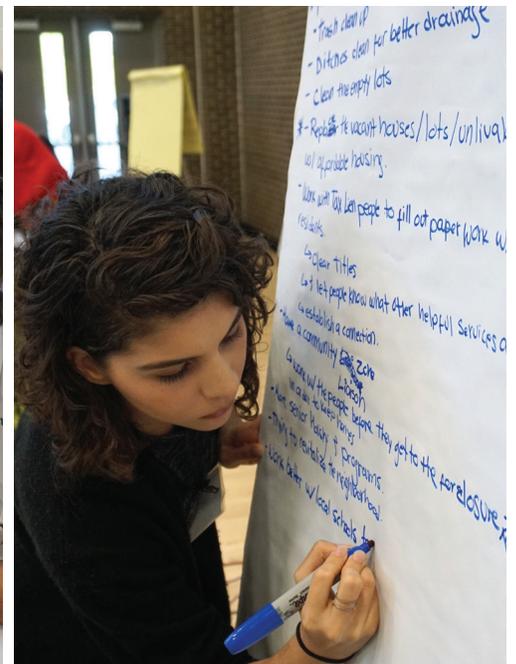
WHAT WE LEARNED FROM PUBLIC MEETINGS

Across the city, Houstonians are still hurting from Harvey. They're nervous about the unknown risks of this hurricane season, and even what will happen with heavy rain. We felt this anxiety when we had to delay the start of the meeting at Westbury High School hosted by Council Member Castex-Tatum while people waited out a thunderstorm that caused flash flooding in the neighborhoods around the school.

We received rich feedback from all meetings, through surveys, written notes, and map-based observations at the neighborhood level. The following are initial observations:

- **Some people have been able to rebuild, but others are stuck in unsafe homes:** All Houstonians prioritize the rebuilding of their homes. But there are differences in how quickly different communities have been able to recover based on their access to the resources needed for rebuilding. In areas where residents have repeatedly flooded or where poverty rates are high, some residents described still living in homes that have not been fully gutted, or with persistent mold that is causing health problems almost a year after the storm. Many people are worried that their homes aren't high enough to avoid future damage. And some residents who have undertaken repairs reported incurring personal debt to meet these costs.
- **Housing and drainage are deeply connected:** While our meetings were primarily about housing recovery, most people also identified drainage as a major concern. Outdated drainage infrastructure, lack of drainage maintenance, the need for varied stormwater management solutions, and enforcement of stormwater standards for new development were issues that residents identified in our meetings across the city.
- **In areas that didn't flood, longtime residents want protection from displacement:** Especially in close-in areas with short transit times to downtown, residents are concerned about being displaced. They fear that long-standing communities will break up in the face of real estate speculation, gentrification, rising rents, and increasing property taxes after Harvey.
- **In areas that flooded badly, a rise in vacant homes is threatening the fabric of communities:** Residents in areas with repeated flooding identified checkerboarded buyouts and a rise in damaged homes that have been abandoned as eroding the cohesiveness of their communities and the value of their homes.
- **Vulnerable Houstonians need special attention:** In every meeting, people expressed concern for neighbors who they saw as especially vulnerable: seniors, those with disabilities, mental health challenges, and others. They also shared their struggles to navigate multiple case management systems and the lack of reliable information about recovery resources.
- **Harvey heightened housing challenges for renters:** Many renters described moving, sometimes multiple times, since Harvey. They reported struggling to find decent affordable rental units that are safe from flooding. Renters also reported unscrupulous behavior by landlords, such as withholding security deposits or making only cosmetic repairs that left issues like mold unresolved. Many renters had not received FEMA assistance and were unaware of benefits that might have been available to them.

- **People want clear communication from trusted sources:** Especially with the start of hurricane season, residents want clear, easily accessible information from official sources. Information can't be limited to the internet and social media and needs to be available in print and through traditional media like newspapers, radio, and TV, in multiple languages.
- **People don't know what to do about contractor fraud:** Many residents reported losing money to contractors who collected payment without completing necessary repairs. There is a lack of awareness of what to do about contractor fraud, and few residents were aware of the State Attorney General's fraud reporting site at <https://texasattorneygeneral.gov/cpd/home-remodeling-and-repair>.
- **The loss of small businesses and community amenities are threatening hard-hit communities:** Communities with high poverty and widespread flooding reported losing small businesses, post offices, libraries, and community centers to the hurricane. People identified these community amenities as essential for providing opportunities for young people and keeping communities vibrant.
- **Delays and confusion in inspection and permitting processes are slowing down rebuilding:** For those with the resources to start rebuilding, frustrations are running high about the complexity and speed of permitting processes. Some who began doing repairs themselves or who have been helped by volunteer groups are receiving fines for not being up to current code. Renters expressed concern about the lack of inspectors for multi-family properties to enforce health and safety regulations.
- **People don't understand the disaster recovery process:** Many residents are confused by the different federal, state, local, and non-profit recovery programs, and almost all participants are frustrated with the pace of long-term recovery. Clear communication about the national disaster recovery framework is needed to help manage expectations and receive meaningful feedback from the community.



WHAT WE LEARNED FROM PUBLIC COMMENTS

HCDD published a draft of its local action plan on June 7 and accepted public comments until June 24. We received 27 comments from a range of organizations and constituents. These comments and a response from HCDD are included in the local action plan being submitted to City Council for approval. The following themes emerged from the public comments:

- **Connect recovery investments to existing initiatives, especially Complete Communities:** several commenters encouraged the City to put resources behind existing plans.
- **Advance equity through recovery spending:** affordable housing coalitions and advocates encouraged an equity-oriented approach to recovery.
- **Use recovery funds to enhance job skills, training, and wages:** workers' advocates called for new workforce development programs building on national best practices.
- **Engage communities and be transparent:** commenters wanted the City to continue efforts to engage the community and increase transparency about recovery.
- **Consider accessibility in recovery planning and programs:** advocates called for the City to take into account the needs of vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities, seniors, and those who do not speak English as a first language.
- **Conduct additional data analysis:** some commenters wanted to see additional data analysis to fully understand the effect of the hurricane on low- and moderate-income populations and protected classes. Others called on the city to use technology and data to inform recovery solutions.
- **Income considerations:** some commenters called for all funds to spent on low- and moderate-income people, or for the city to deepen affordability requirements in City-funded projects. Others called for the City to broaden the availability of programs to be open to all income levels, particularly for seniors on fixed incomes who may make more than 80% AMI.
- **Consider solutions for homeowners who have received substantial damage letters (SDL):** some commenters asked for priority for those with substantial damage letters, requiring the elevation or reconstruction of homes due to flood damage, especially those in areas affected by the Addicks and Barker reservoir releases.
- **Use recovery dollars to enhance homelessness services and prevention:** homelessness advocates called for a range of approaches to prevent a spike in homelessness as a result of Harvey.



WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE HARVEY HOUSING RECOVERY SURVEY

On May 14, we launched a Hurricane Harvey Recovery Survey to gather information regarding ongoing community needs. This survey was made available online through Survey Monkey until June 24, 2018. A total of 746 people responded.

Hurricane Harvey affected over two-thirds of the respondents. Of respondents affected by Hurricane Harvey,

- About two-thirds had a home that was “Completely Destroyed” or “Damaged A lot”
- Only one out of four were getting the help they needed
- Over 75% were displaced from their home, 30% are still waiting to move back, and 9% have no plans to return to where they were living at the time of Hurricane Harvey
- Over two-thirds had a vehicle that was destroyed
- Half feel that their mental health has suffered
- About one-third
 - Lived in transitional housing (e.g. hotel, rental apartment, shelter)
 - Had infrastructure damage in their neighborhood (e.g. street, sidewalks, park)
 - Lived with family or friends
- About one fourth
 - Have been living in a house or apartment that needs repair
 - Have someone in their household with a worsening health condition
- Almost two out of five have a personal situation that is “still very disrupted” and only one out of five were “unaffected” or “largely back to normal”
- Over 80% still need help
 - Half need assistance repairing damage to the home they own
 - One-third need help navigating through available disaster recovery programs
 - 13% need help with mental health
 - Many said financial assistance was a need
- Almost all had received help in their recovery process
 - Two-thirds received FEMA assistance
 - Over half received help from a friend or a family member
 - About one-third received help from a religious organization or a neighbor

The **top three biggest challenges** facing residents in recovery from Hurricane Harvey are 1) funding the repair or reconstruction of their home, 2) financial impacts, and 3) fear of flooding again.

Summary of Funding Priorities

Most respondents (59.59%) thought that funding should be used to help the most people rebuild what they had before the disaster, and most (66.89%) thought that there should be more resources available in their neighborhood.

The top three housing activities that respondents selected were 1) help **repair or rebuild homes for homeowners**, 2) **buyout homes** in the floodplain to remove resident from future flooding, and 3) help **raise homes** in the floodplain to protect resident from future flooding. Other housing priorities given by respondents included 1) flood prevention/infrastructure improvement, 2) development restrictions, and 3) financial assistance. Almost all (85%) of respondents thought the elderly should receive high priority for housing help, and over two-thirds of respondents thought that families with children, persons with a disability, and homeowners should also receive a high priority for housing help.

The top three activities to reduce the risks of future flooding include 1) **drainage improvements** to prevent flooding during heavy rains, 2) **large scale flood retention/detention improvements** to hold water runoff (ponds and basins), and 3) **other changes to infrastructure** through building or improvement dams, levees, seawalls, retaining walls. Other prevention activities given by respondents included 1) development restrictions, 2) improvements to Buffalo Bayou, and 3) buyouts.

Over 80% of respondents thought it was very important that 1) the community **take regulatory action** to influence the way land is developed and buildings are built and that 2) actions should be taken to **lessen the impact of flooding** through structural projects.

The top three themes that respondents thought that the City of Houston can do in their neighborhoods with CDBG-DR funds to reduce or eliminate the risk of damage from future natural disasters include 1) **improve water drainage, storage, and management**, 2) **maintain and improve bayous**, and 3) **build a third reservoir**.

When recovering from Hurricane Harvey, respondents want to be nationally and internationally known for:

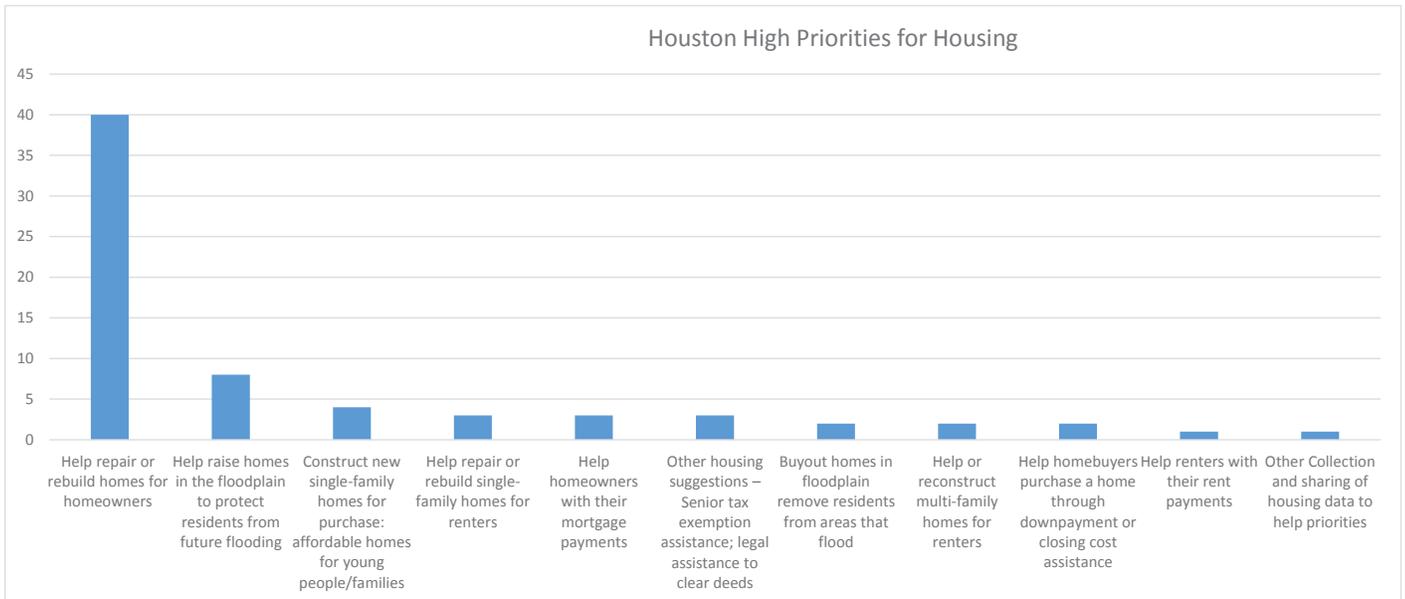
- Taking Action / Preventing and Preparing for Future Flooding / Evidence-Based Decisions / Learning from the Past
- People Helping People / Community / Unity
- Helping and Caring for All Residents
- Flood Innovation / State of the Art and Adaptable Infrastructure/Leader in Flood Control
- Resilience
- Equitable/Equality / Fair Distribution of Resources
- Development Standards, Restrictions, and Policies

PRIORITIES FOR BUILDING FORWARD

Throughout the engagements, residents echoed Mayor Turner’s ambition to **build forward into new opportunities**, not just to rebuild what was there before. At each community engagement meeting, we conducted a voting exercise with participants for both housing and infrastructure programs. This is not a highly scientific exercise, and we recognize that results are skewed toward those most likely to attend community meetings. Sheryl McCurdy, Ph.D. and Preena Loomba, from the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences, the Center for Health Promotion and Prevention Research, and the Southwest Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth), conducted an analysis of participants’ priorities.

Overall, the main housing priority is to **rebuild or repair homes** that were destroyed or flooded during the hurricane. In areas that were flooded, the highest priorities for recovery were **repairing homes for homeowners** and **raising homes in the floodplain** to protect from future flooding. Residents also want help to **rebuild single-family homes or multi-family developments for renters**. Across the city, participants identified **infrastructure improvements** as high priority, especially with respect to drainage and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks, waterlines. Participants also prioritized **supportive services** such as health and mental health services, legal services, and housing counseling.

In identifying priorities for recovery programs included in the local action plan, participants voted most frequently for homeowner assistance programs, especially the buyout, reimbursement for repairs, and single-family development programs. This priority is reflected in the current budget.



HOW ENGAGEMENT INFORMS OUR APPROACH FOR HOUSING RECOVERY

The purpose of the City's extensive engagement was to receive feedback at the start of recovery. The feedback we received from the community, through public meetings, the online survey, and written comments, has helped shape our approach to housing recovery. Some changes are reflected in the draft plan that will be submitted to City Council, and some recommendations will be incorporated into program design and HCDD's recovery strategy going forward. We anticipate that the City will submit multiple amendments to this plan over the six years of recovery. Some things that are not included in this first plan will be included in later amendments.

- **Program budget amounts remain the same:** The feedback affirmed that the breakdown of programs generally reflects Houstonians' priorities for recovery, especially the focus on home repair as the biggest budget category. Houstonians are seeking a diverse approach to recovery that includes multiple housing strategies.
- **Mitigation is not included in this plan, but will be connected to housing going forward:** Because there is more money coming for mitigation and infrastructure, this plan continues to prioritize housing. As we get more clarity about the requirements for mitigation funding, we will seek to link housing and infrastructure investments.
- **Commitment to a balanced approach to fair housing:** The revised plan includes additional language on the City's commitment to fair housing, using the "right to stay, right to choose" framework championed by housing advocates in Houston.
- **Equitable approach:** The Mayor has been clear that the values of the recovery are equity and resilience to build forward into a stronger city. This document and the ongoing engagement around program design reflect that commitment.
- **Increase the maximum award for home repair to \$80,000:** The maximum award has been increased from \$65,000 to \$80,000. This is consistent with Harris County's approach.
- **Inclusion of workforce development under public services:** We will continue to work with workers' advocates to develop a program for workforce development based on national best practices and the experience of New York City in Hurricane Sandy recovery.
- **Updated needs assessment coming this summer:** While we have continued to use the HUD/GLO needs assessment framework in this draft, we will publish a phase two needs assessment based on additional, more comprehensive data this summer to inform program development. Going forward, we are committed to using the most comprehensive data available to inform program development and increase transparency.
- **Building on existing plans:** As we develop program guidelines, we will look to use existing plans, such as Complete Communities, as a way to inform investments in housing.
- **New partnerships to stretch recovery dollars:** Even with significant federal resources, we will not be able to meet all housing needs in the city. We are working to develop new partnerships with philanthropy and the private sector to allow for greater flexibility, creativity, and leverage in our programs.

LIST OF MEETINGS AND EVENTS

Date	Meeting	Purpose	Event Type
4/25/2018	Small group meeting with potential community engagement partners	Discuss best practices for community engagement and identify potential community partners	Focus group
5/2/2018	Small group meeting at 601 Sawyer St. with potential community engagement partners	Discuss format and schedule for community engagement events	Focus group
5/9/2018	Small group meeting at 601 Sawyer St. with potential community engagement partners	Discuss format and schedule for community engagement events	Focus group
5/16/2018	Small group meeting at 601 Sawyer St. with potential community engagement partners	Discuss format and schedule for community engagement events	Focus group
5/19/2018	Community Meeting - Partnered with Texas Organizing Project at Harris County AFL-CIO	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on the Eastside	Public meeting
5/20/2018	Presented at the The Metropolitan Organization Harvey recovery event at Memorial Drive United Methodist Church	Share information and answer questions about long-term recovery	Presentation
5/23/2018	Housing Focus Group – For-profit developers at 601 Sawyer St.	Gather information from for-profit developers about expanding capacity for disaster recovery	Focus group
5/23/2018	Community Meeting - Partnered with Texas Organizing Project at Denver Harbor Multi-Service Center	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods near Denver Harbor	Public meeting
5/24/2018	Housing Focus Group – Partnered with Houston Housing Coalition at the Montrose Center	Consult with the Houston Housing Coalition on priorities for affordable housing	Focus group
5/24/2018	Housing Focus Group – Partnered with LISC at LISC's offices	Gather information from non-profit developers about expanding capacity for disaster recovery	Focus group

Date	Meeting	Purpose	Event Type
5/25/2018	Non-profit Focus Group – Partnered with LISC at LISC’s offices	Gather information from non-profit service providers about current needs and expanding capacity for disaster recovery	Focus group
5/26/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with FIEL Houston at FIEL Houston	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in Southwest Houston	Public meeting
5/29/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Texas Organizing Project at Acres Homes Multi-Service Center	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods around Acres Homes	Public meeting
6/2/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Texas Organizing Project at Greater St. Matthews Baptist Church	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in Sunnyside and Southpark	Public meeting
6/2/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Texas Organizing Project at the Northeast Multi-Service Center	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in the Northeast	Public meeting
6/2/2018	Participated in the Extreme Weather Ready Expo at the George R. Brown Convention Center	Distributed surveys to residents interested in disaster preparedness	Presentation
6/6/2018	Teletownhall – Partnered with AARP (English)	Dial-in format to reach seniors and answer questions about recovery	Public meeting
6/7/2018	Teletownhall – Partnered with AARP and Univision (Spanish)	Dial-in format to reach seniors and answer questions about recovery	Public meeting
6/7/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Texas Organizing Project at SW Multiservice Center	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in the Southwest	Public meeting
6/11/2018	Presented at the Super Neighborhood Alliance meeting at City Hall Annex	Share information with neighborhood leadership	Presentation
6/12/2018	Presented at the Kashmere Gardens Super Neighborhood Council meeting at the Kashmere Multiservice Center	Share information with affected residents about long-term recovery	Presentation
6/13/2018	Presented on the Disability Community Harvey Recovery Call hosted by the Mayor’s Office of People with Disabilities	Share information with disability rights advocates	Presentation

Date	Meeting	Purpose	Event Type
6/13/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Council Members Gallegos and Davis, and Super Neighborhoods 57 and 59 at the Judson Robinson, Sr. Community Center	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in the Pleasantville and Clinton Park neighborhoods	Public meeting
6/14/2018	Presented at the Houston Housing Collaborative at the Montrose Center	Share information with housing advocates	Presentation
6/14/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Council Member Stardig at the Trini Mendenhall Community Center	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in District A	Public meeting
6/16/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Council Member Boykins at San Jacinto Community College	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on District D	Public meeting
6/16/2018	Presented at the TOP annual meeting at TOP's office	Report back on disaster recovery community meetings co-hosted with TOP	Presentation
6/18/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with the Emancipation Economic Development Council at Blackshear Elementary School	Gather need and priority information for community residents, focused on Third Ward	Public meeting
6/19/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Council Member Martin at the St. Stephen Presbyterian Church	Gather need and priority information for community residents, focused on Southeast Houston	Public meeting
6/20/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Council Member Castex-Tatum	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in District K	Public meeting
6/21/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with the East Houston Civic Association at the East Houston Civic Association	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in East Houston	Public meeting
6/23/2018	Community Meeting – Partnered with Council Member Travis at the Tallowood Baptist Church	Gather need and priority information from community residents, focused on neighborhoods in District G	Public meeting

