

Edwards announces projects to protect against storms

BY MELINDA DESLATTE

Associated Press

Louisiana will spend nearly \$277 million in federal cash it received after last year's floods to fortify communities against future disasters, mainly through drainage improvements and buyouts of flood-prone properties.

Gov. John Bel Edwards is traveling the state to announce projects from the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. He held an event Wednesday at Louisiana's emergency preparedness headquarters touting the spending as a way to help the state better withstand the next storm.

The March and August 2016 floods hit 56 of Louisiana's 64 parishes, damaging an estimated 112,000 homes, with some towns and cities still digging out of the destruction a year later.

"We need to do all that we can to prevent people from going through that again. We know it's just a matter of time living where we do before Mother Nature delivers these types of extreme weather events here in Louisiana," the governor said.

Combined with previous unspent hazard mitigation dollars provided to Louisiana after hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008, the Edwards administration has earmarked nearly \$317 million for protection projects around Louisiana.

The dollars are allocated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and each project must receive FEMA approval to begin. Edwards expects mitigation dollars to begin flowing within four months.

Although some money will be spent on home elevations, the Edwards administration is taking a different approach from the one Louisiana used after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Much of the state's hazard mitigation grant money paid to raise individual homes after Katrina, but Edwards said he doesn't believe that's the best approach to reduce future flood losses.

"We are trying to transition away from that because that is so expensive, and you use up all your available dollars if you elevate too many structures. What we would much rather do is better control the floodwaters on a floodplain basis, which is why these dollars are

going to go into a lot of drainage projects," Edwards said.

The lion's share of the federal cash, about \$220 million, will go to the Baton Rouge region, which received heavy destruction in August. East Baton Rouge Parish will receive \$112 million, Livingston Parish will get \$68 million and Ascension Parish will receive nearly \$34 million.

"Oh my goodness, I'm extremely pleased. I'm excited. I'm elated," said Livingston Parish President Layton Ricks. "This is right in the middle of the numbers we were hoping for."

The Acadiana region, which also got walloped in August, is slated for \$30 million.

Dollars were divvied up using a formula based on flood losses. Specific plans continue to be drafted for communities to spend their money. Ricks said his parish is doing mapping work to determine which specific projects could help lessen flooding, while working with neighboring parishes so projects don't create flood problems for them.

On Tuesday, Edwards was in north Louisiana to announce spending plans. Projects include drainage pipe replacements, water pump station upgrades and levee improvements.

Nearly \$5 million will be spent to buy out flood-prone property in Monroe and West Monroe and turn the areas into green spaces.

The Edwards administration says the dollars are woefully short of what is needed to improve Louisiana's resilience against storms. The Governor's Office estimates another \$725 million more is needed, and local officials are hoping Congress will allocate more.