A SNAPSHOT OF URBAN PLANNING IN TEXAS COASTAL COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the state of Texas has seen very rapid urban growth. Unfortunately, urban planning is only recommended by the state and not mandated like many other states in the country. This proves to be very difficult for smaller coastal communities in Texas because they do not necessarily have the resources to undertake meaningful planning projects, let alone hire planning professionals. A survey was created and dispersed through Google Forms from February 1, 2012 to March 15, 2012 to evaluate if and how Texas coastal communities are planning for their future. The survey focused on comprehensive planning, hazards planning, and planning for future environmental changes. The spread of respondents ranged from far south on the coast all the way up to northern Texas coastal communities. The survey was solicited to community planning professionals. A wide range of those professionals participated in the survey, from planning directors to planning staff to city secretaries. This snap shot can give Texas coastal planners and extension professionals an idea of where our coastal communities stand regarding urban planning.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The survey indicates that the majority of communities along the Texas Coast participate in comprehensive planning. Eighty-six percent of Texas coastal communities said they had comprehensive plans and they were adopted by their respective city. However, communities were less likely to have a comprehensive plan that had been updated within the last five years, but still at a majority rate of 64%. The majority of communities adopted ordinances such as zoning (71%), land use (71%), subdivision (100%), sign (93%), and landscaping (64%). Only 43% of communities surveyed adopted a tree ordinance. Fifty percent of the communities used overlay districts for planning and zoning purposes. Some examples of the uses of these overlay districts include: building restrictions, sustainability initiatives, clustered development, historic zones, conservation zones, special character districts, and high flood areas. The majority of communities (86%) said they did not designate any lands as special purpose areas. The 14% of communities that do designate lands as special purpose areas use them for parks, protected wetlands, and recreational uses.
Sixty-four percent of the communities that took the survey indicated that they had an adopted hazards mitigation plan. Thirty-six percent of communities did not have an adopted hazards mitigation plan. Coastal hazards planning is an interesting topic because there is not a typical scenario for any Texas coastal community. Typically, Texas coastal counties run emergency management plans and hold emergency management power in terms of coastal hazards. Typically the county runs the Emergency Operating Center (EOC) and city staff usually have representatives that serve at the EOC meetings.
Approximately half of all coastal communities in Texas prepare in some way for future environmental changes. Many planning efforts identified in the survey are related to climate change impacts. Typical planning for future changes focus on sea level rise, more frequent and intense storms, building setbacks, emergency preparations, community sustainability standards, increased flooding, storm water management, decreased impervious surfaces, and a variety of flood mitigation practices.
FIGURE 3: SOME COASTAL COMMUNITIES IN TEXAS ADAPT TO A CHANGING CLIMATE

CONCLUSION

The coastal planning survey gives a great snapshot of the types of community planning efforts that are taking place across the Texas coast. While most communities practice some sort of traditional urban planning, the number of communities start to dwindle that employ more targeted planning efforts such as coastal hazards and planning for environmental changes (sea level rise, erosion, climate change, etc.) This brief snapshot of coastal Texas planning efforts can help Texas planners and extension professionals get an idea of where they can focus their own planning efforts and education programs regarding the coastal communities they work with. While the majority of communities have some sort of planning under their belt, there is still much room for improvement.