



Hidalgo County Office of Emergency Management

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SUMMARY

Hidalgo County was formed in 1852 and is named after Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a priest who raised the call for Mexico's independence from Spanish rule. It is surrounded by Cameron County on the east, Brooks County on the north, Starr County on the west, and Mexico on the south, The County is the eighth-largest county of the 254 counties in Texas.

Hidalgo County is home to 22 cities. The largest city is McAllen, followed by Edinburg, Pharr, and Mission an area known as a "metropolitan statistical area," the fifth largest in the state. Moreover, it encompasses over 900 *colonias*. According to the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, "*Colonia*," Spanish for neighborhood or community, is a geographic area located within 150 miles of the Texas-Mexico border that has a majority population composed of individuals and families of low and very low income. These families lack safe, sanitary and sound housing and many are without basic services such as potable water, adequate sewage systems, drainage, utilities, and paved roads. With living conditions often compared to developing countries, the *colonias* present one of the most critical housing needs in the state. Housing in the *colonias* is primarily constructed with scarce materials and professional builders are rarely used. Residents frequently start with makeshift structures of wood, cardboard or other materials. As finances allow, they continue to improve their homes. In addition to a lack of adequate wastewater infrastructure, most roadways located in *colonias* are "*caliche*," which is a Spanish word defined as gravel, sand and desert debris cemented by a porous calcium carbonate, according to then state geologist Bill Farr. The County of Hidalgo also inhabits large bodies of water such as the Edinburg Lake, the Hidalgo County Master Drainage System, the International Floodways, and the Rio Grande River.

Richard F. Cortez serves as the head of Hidalgo County's governing body as County Judge. Judge Cortez plays a critical role that is part administrative, part legislative, and part judicial. Additionally, by state law, the County Judge is also the county's Director of Emergency Management, leading the Hidalgo County Office of Emergency Management (HCOEM). HCOEM prides itself in fulfilling its main purpose: to ensure that Hidalgo County Government maintains continuity of operations and services for its residents. Furthermore, HCOEM strives to achieve this goal, by maintaining situational awareness, a continuous cycle of planning, prevention, protection, response, mitigation and recovery.

BACKGROUND

HCOEM responds to fires, hurricanes and other natural disasters or severe weather threats, acts of terrorism, pandemic flu, and whatever other public health threats that may exist.

HCOEM coordinates with area Emergency Managers, Law Enforcement, Fire Departments, Public and Private Emergency response entities, Hospitals, Nursing Homes, Home Health Agencies, Local, State and Federal Governments, Councils of Government and numerous Non-Profits.

2020 has proven to be particularly challenging the emergency management field. Like much of the Country and the world Hidalgo County has worked tirelessly to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For much of 2020 Hidalgo County has ranked as a “hotspot,” during July of 2020 Hidalgo County was regularly featured in national news media which highlighted the severe impact of COVID-19 on our population. As we mobilized our response to overflowing hospitals Hidalgo County found itself in the direct path of Hurricane Hanna.

On July 25, 2020 Hurricane Hanna made landfall just north of the Texas Rio Grande Valley. South Texas was battered by wind gusts in excess of 110mph. Many of the *colonias* located in Hidalgo County received over 12 inches of rain with some areas reporting over 16 inches of rain. The excessive rainfall quickly overwhelmed the sparse and sometimes nonexistent drainage systems placing many low income residents in harm’s way.

Similarly, in June of 2018 Hidalgo County experienced what was referred to as a "500 year storm" event. Shortly thereafter, in June of 2019 was followed by yet another storm of the same magnitude. Followed by Hurricane Hanna in July of 2020 which left remnants of the Category 1 hurricane which caused Hidalgo County residents to deal with the aftermath of its first direct hit. Water rescues were well underway and drainage systems in many parts of the county had reached capacity. As a result of this situation, it left a number of residents displaced/stranded in their homes with inaccessible road conditions that could only be reached by high-profile vehicles and all-terrain vehicles (ATV's).

Within the past 10 years, Hidalgo County experienced several severe weather incidents such as acute storms, tornado-like winds, straight-winds and flooding. During these storms, severe flooding has destroyed homes, roads and critical infrastructure throughout the rural areas of Hidalgo County. High water rescues are routine occurrence. The local *caliche* roads become impassible for low profile vehicles because of the flooding. Traditional high profile vehicles cannot safely traverse these roads due to the soft caliche base. This leaves local residents stranded in their homes without electricity, food, water or medical attention. As so often happens the most vulnerable in our community are sometimes the most challenging to assist. A tool that would be critical in responding to flooding, fire and other local emergencies would be a small footprint all-terrain utility vehicle.

PROPOSED USE

If awarded this grant Hidalgo County OEM will purchase a small foot print all-terrain utility vehicle to assist the HCOEM Department in rescue missions as well as for surveying difficult to reach locations affected by inclement weather conditions and other emergency situations. An ATV would be the ideal addition to the Hidalgo County Office of Emergency Management in order to be able to maneuver through rough terrain, as well as constricted, hard-to-reach spaces left by flooding especially in off road, remote, and unincorporated areas of the county.