



Stimulus storm-proofing

By Barney Bishop III, Special to the Times

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At this time of year, Floridians know to monitor the weather reports carefully in light of the risks from hurricanes that threaten our state. This year is also one in which federal stimulus dollars are starting to flow, and Floridians and our elected leaders should keep an eye on this torrent as well.

Now that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has been enacted into law and the funds are being allocated, all Floridians have an interest in ensuring that our state participates equitably and that the funds we receive are invested wisely for the highest possible returns. In particular, Florida needs greater access to federal dollars to better protect our hurricane-prone state through mitigation investments for our homes and businesses. With Congress back in session, Florida's delegation should recognize the importance of supporting narrow but important changes to permit Florida to use the money to reduce the greatest risks we face.

While a significant percentage of the \$787 billion economic stimulus passed by Congress in mid February has already been spent, much remains to be allocated. One area of the stimulus bill we should explore more robustly is the portion set aside for "weatherization" — that is, the retrofitting of homes to make them more energy efficient. While Florida will participate in this program to a degree, the bulk of the money set aside so far is flowing to cold-weather states. At the same time, the language of the stimulus law does not specifically provide for storm-proofing homes and businesses, even though the techniques to "seal the envelope" of a structure to protect it from energy loss and storms generally overlap and are frequently identical. Simple changes to this language could permit stimulus investments to make Florida families and businesses safer from storms while reducing their utility bills.

Seeking stimulus funding for mitigation is especially important because the state Legislature let the state-run My Safe Florida Home program expire at the end of June because of a lack of funding. Associated Industries will continue working to reinstate this important program, which helped retrofit nearly 33,000 homes and put the state on firmer financial footing by reducing our economic exposure to hurricanes. Floridians of all political stripes are in tune with the tremendous benefits of home mitigation. If the benefits of home mitigation are supported on a federal level, it is almost inconceivable to imagine how much progress we can make to better protect our hurricane-prone state.

The My Safe Florida Home program not only provided a benefit to the homes and businesses that were inspected and retrofitted, but also provided relief to the homebuilding and construction sector that has been particularly hard-hit by the economic crisis in Florida. The program

identified 2,271 contractors to participate in the program and, at one point, employed 900 inspectors to perform \$58 million of inspection work. Obtaining federal dollars for weatherization projects will continue to benefit contractors and other skilled laborers at a time when the building industry is still suffering. The jobs that will become available if this legislation is approved will occur well before new construction recovery.

Environmental groups have also been speaking out on the importance of home mitigation. Groups such as the National Wildlife Federation and Sierra Club have reached out to leadership in Washington, requesting that an investment in hazard mitigation be included in the economic stimulus package. The prospect of money being allocated to this cause is a "twofer," making homes safer from storms without sacrificing the "green" cause.

Programs implemented in Florida and nationwide have proven that mitigation investments are known to have great returns, including a savings of \$4 or more for every \$1 spent. Strengthening homes through mitigation protects against the devastating effects of hurricanes and helps reduce the state's exposure to catastrophic damage. It also plays a key role in keeping property insurance coverage available to and affordable for hardworking Floridians.

I urge Florida's congressional delegation to understand how our state would greatly benefit from economic stimulus funds being dedicated to weatherization. It is imperative that The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act be amended and supported as not only one of the many long-term solutions that will stabilize the state's insurance markets, but for the overall benefits it will provide to the citizens of the Sunshine State. Mitigation investments will generate economic activity at the state level and create jobs in the construction sector, while simultaneously providing Florida citizens and businesses with resources necessary to reduce the impact of natural disasters by saving lives, minimizing property damage and reducing the future cost of federal response and recovery programs.

Thankfully, Hurricane Bill and the 2009 storm season have so far passed by Florida. Let's not say the same for this portion of the stimulus program.

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