

September 26, 2005 It appears there were very few deaths in Texas due to Hurricane Rita, for which we should be very thankful. We can only wonder whether God was watching over us, sparing our nation from another calamity on the heels of Hurricane Katrina. Yet we also should recognize that competent and thorough planning ensured the safety of those in south Texas. In the 14th congressional district, local leaders did an exceptional job of preparing for Hurricane Rita. Officials and citizens in Galveston and Brazoria counties deserve special praise for showing the nation and the world the right way to prepare for a natural disaster. They proved that the best emergency planning takes place at the state and local level, by people who know the local citizens, roads, coastlines, and topography. The 14th district was fortunate to escape the worst of Rita. Brazoria county came through the storm mostly unscathed, with some wind damage and power outages. Surfside Beach and Freeport were worst hit, but coastal areas further south in Matagorda county thankfully suffered little or no damage. Galveston Island suffered the worst destruction, but much of it was caused by fires from downed electrical poles. As of today some of the island already has power, a remarkable achievement considering the storm hit just 48 hours ago. Evacuation of Galveston county residents began on Monday and Tuesday, leaving plenty of extra time to move those in nursing homes and hospitals. The coordination of city buses for those without cars was magnificent: all buses left from a central community center, and a hotline was set up for those who needed a ride to the staging area. A private organization called the Citizens' Response Team also assisted in making sure everyone who needed a ride received one. Special provisions were made to allow pets on the buses, which prevented any agonizing decisions. Televised images of the long line of buses leaving Galveston in an orderly convoy provided a stark contrast to events in New Orleans just a few weeks ago. Residents of Brazoria and Galveston counties followed the designated evacuation routes perfectly, and experienced no problems until they reached Harris County and points north. The real traffic problems were caused by the huge exodus of Houston drivers. State officials will have to reconsider evacuation routes out of Houston, but Brazoria and Galveston counties clearly were not part of the problem. Local police and emergency personnel in Galveston worked 12 hour shifts, and stayed up all night Friday monitoring the situation. They had special cell phones and satellite phones that work even when cell towers are overloaded or knocked down, ensuring they could communicate no matter what. The City even had a plan in place for decision making in the event the mayor was not available. When the storm did hit Galveston, local emergency personnel had help from fire departments in nearby Dickinson, Friendswood, and La Marque. Galveston Police Chief Kenneth Mack reported that there was no looting whatsoever, a testament to a job well done. Special kudos are in order for Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas and Galveston City Manager Steve LeBlanc. Both provided plain-spoken, calm, collected, confident leadership throughout the week. Neither was overwhelmed by the task at hand or the national media spotlight. Every city in the nation must be jealous of the big-time leadership exhibited in a town of just 60,000 people. The people of south Texas relied not on FEMA or federal Homeland Security, but rather on themselves, their families, their neighbors, their local police and fire crews, and their local officials. The Texas Department of Public Safety and Governor Perry played strong supporting roles, but the real work was done locally, community by community. Nobody in Washington can know what is best for Galveston or any other community when facing a natural disaster. Of course federal tax dollars should be returned to south Texas to fund rebuilding in ways that strengthen our infrastructure against future hurricanes. But the real lesson of Katrina was taken to heart in Texas: local citizens must take the initiative and take care of themselves when emergencies

arise. Congratulations to everyone in the 14th district for the tremendous show of Texas self-reliance in the face of Hurricane Rita.