State emergency centers not hurricane-proof

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By The Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE - Of all the places you'd think would be hurricane proof, emergency operations centers in Florida counties would be at the top of the list. But there are more than 20 Florida counties where the buildings where emergency workers ride out storms might not survive the worst hurricanes. Some are even in flood zones, according to a recent review by state officials. "These are not like tin sheds or shacks or anything," said state Emergency Director Craig Fugate. "But ... when we look at EOCs, we want the maximum protection."

The vulnerability has prompted Gov. Jeb Bush to ask legislators to put $70 million into shoring up county emergency operations centers next year.

"We are in a flood zone where we are now, and we have 16 work stations - during our briefings we have about 100 people in here," said Jaime Sarbaugh, a spokeswoman for the Collier County emergency operations office. "We definitely don't have room. It's outdated."

State officials have identified 22 counties that do not meet a national standard for surviving a Category 3 hurricane, where winds top 111 miles an hour. Some are inland and haven't experienced such winds in memory, but others are in coastal areas and some, like the EOC in the Florida Keys, have been in the middle of several recent hurricanes.

There, at the Monroe County Emergency Operations Center in Marathon, officials have an outdated makeshift operations center that has to be set up when a disaster happens, a process that can take up to eight hours.

"When you start moving computers around and setting up stuff ... if we have

short notice on it, we don't have time to have people secure their houses," said Monroe County Emergency Operations Director Billy Wagner. "In an area that's known to be one of the most hurricane-prone you don't have a dedicated emergency operations center. I've been fighting for it for 25 years now."

Despite the frenzy of the last couple of years, generally most areas only see major disasters only every so many years, and in between its hard to convince people to spend money on preparedness, Fugate said.

"Because of all the competing interests it just hasn't gotten funded," Fugate said. "Typically, they've been built with local money."

Fugate said he faced the same funding issues when he was a local emergency management official in Alachua County, in north-central Florida, every time he asked for more money for building improvements or equipment.

"I had to get apologized to a lot," Fugate recalled.

"They said, 'I've got to build a fire station, or I've got to expand a jail.'"

That's why the Bush administration decided to try and provide state money.

The Legislature will write the state's budget for the coming fiscal year. It could take Bush's recommendation, or decide to spend less, more or nothing at all on the issue. The idea got an informal endorsement from the Senate Transportation budget committee Thursday when its chairman, Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, pledged his support.

Being on the list of EOCs that should be upgraded doesn't mean they would all necessarily collapse in a storm.

"Some of them are in storm surge areas, some of them, the roofs aren't going to survive" a Category 4 or 5 storm, Fugate said.

In addition to being unable to withstand the most powerful hurricanes, many have other problems that come along with being in old buildings, such as not having enough space for all the workers, like Collier.

Collier County, in fast-growing Southwest Florida, has already picked out a design for a new building in the Naples area, but officials there are trying to work out where to locate it.

The new building won't have a real first floor - it will be an area for parking and storage - so flood waters will run underneath the building. It will be a much better place to ride out the next hurricane, Sarbaugh said.

And the structure will survive the strongest hurricanes.

"A category 4 for sure, and probably a 5," Sarbaugh said.