

Pasadena Citizens' Advisory Council

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Summary of Thursday, March 23, 2017 Meeting

PCAC Visits Houston TranStar, Tours Harris County Emergency Operations Center

Houston TranStar, opened in 1996, is a partnership of four government agencies that are responsible for transportation and emergency management for the Greater Houston region. That region includes not only the fourth most populous city in the nation, but also 33 other cities, 54 fire departments, 125 law enforcement agencies, 22 watersheds, and 9,000 miles of pipelines. Out of a national list of hazards an area could experience, this region could have all except volcanoes.

The TranStar partners are Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), Metropolitan Transit Authority (METRO), City of Houston, and Harris County. TranStar's mission is to provide the best transportation and emergency management services through the use of their collective resources to maximize safety and mobility to the public. More than 15 different departments and divisions work together at TranStar. They include METRO's Bus Dispatch and Police; City of Houston's Traffic Operations and Right-of-Way Maintenance; TxDOT's Freeway Traffic Management and Maintenance; Harris County's Traffic Operations, Sheriff's Office, and Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management; and federal agencies such as the FBI, and Customs and Border Patrol. An event might also bring in the Harris County Hospital District, Houston ISD, the medical examiner, and even Walmart. The benefit of having multiple agencies in one location is that information and resources can be collectively used, which gives TranStar an advantage over other agencies that work alone.

PCAC was invited to tour the recently enlarged TranStar by David Wade, Harris County Industrial Liaison. Misty Gunn, Manager of the county's Emergency Operations Center (EOC), described the office and its work. She showed an emergency management video that succinctly explains what emergency managers do and why they are needed. Gunn emphasized their role in providing timely and accurate information during an event. Wade talked about his role as Industrial Liaison.

TranStar's Emergency Operations Center is activated when emergency conditions such as hurricanes, floods, and industrial accidents arise, and when other local high profile events such as NFL Super Bowl occur. Representatives from all four partnering agencies, as well as diverse entities such as the Salvation Army, American Red Cross, area local governments, and amateur radio operator volunteers come together to coordinate a quick and effective response.

TranStar uses state-of-the-art technologies to reduce congestion on major roadways. The staff at TranStar utilizes approximately 1,000 regional Closed Circuit Television Cameras to monitor traffic incidents and during a hurricane evacuation they have access to close to 2,000 cameras. They are able to dispatch vehicles to remove debris or hazardous materials, communicate with emergency vehicles about the most direct routes to an accident scene, and send tow trucks to stalled vehicles.

On the tour, PCAC saw the desks that would be occupied during an event by the various agencies but were particularly interested in the technology that assists emergency managers to carry out their responsibilities.