

Balto. geography has edge over Houston's

Despite extra options, backups leaving city would be inevitable, experts say

HURRICANE RITA

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Baltimore is not Houston.

It's a smaller metropolitan area. It's not on an exposed coast. Most hurricanes have dwindled to tropical storms by the time they get this far inland. Any scenario requiring a citywide evacuation is much more improbable here than in the Texas metropolis.

But what if?

State officials charged with emergency preparations say that if Baltimoreans did have to evacuate in a disaster, backups would be inevitable. But they doubt the traffic jams would reach the nightmare proportions of Houston, where traffic froze on the interstates out of town and thousands of cars ran out of gasoline before they could get free.

A University of Maryland transportation expert says the success of any evacuation of Baltimore would depend heavily on the preparation and decisions made by government officials and traffic managers.

If handled well, an evacuation of Baltimore could go much better than Houston's, said Hani Mahmassani, director of the university's Maryland Transportation Initiative. But if it were mishandled - especially around the vulnerable Baltimore Harbor crossings - the result could be just as bad.

State officials point to some important geographical differences. In Houston, for all practical purposes, there is no eastern or southern escape route. Baltimore lacks an easy eastern evacuation corridor, which means the eastern peninsulas in Baltimore City and county have limited ways out, but other directions are open.

"We have a broader network to spread the traffic out in all directions," said John Contestabile, emergency service director for the Maryland Department of Transportation. "We've got a pretty good spoke system, as well as several interstates that give us some diversity."

Contestabile said the State Highway Administration has a Freeway Incident Traffic Management plan for each interchange along the Washington and Baltimore beltways, and Interstate 95.

"We know exactly where to put traffic control," he said, recalling that a plan to reroute traffic was implemented in minutes after a fatal tanker-truck crash at Interstates 895 and 95 in January 2004.

But Contestabile conceded that drivers in an evacuation might find themselves seeing the same thing Houston motorists saw last week - huge backups in one direction and almost no traffic coming the other way.

That's because, for example, opening up the southbound lanes of Interstate 83 or the eastbound lanes of Interstate 70 to traffic leaving Baltimore - a practice called "contraflow" - would be a trickier operation than it might appear.

Contestabile noted that all the signs would be pointed in the other direction, the ramps would lead to oncoming traffic and emergency vehicles would likely be heading to the city.

"It's appealing because you see a lot of pavement not being used," he said. "It's not straightforward, and it's difficult to do safely."

But the highway official refused to rule out such a measure.

"We would probably consider whatever we had to do," he said.

Mahmassani, who is helping Baltimore metropolitan officials develop a framework for planning evacuation scenarios,

said contraflow would be essential to a successful evacuation.

"In an evacuation situation, you have to say, 'We have to use our capacity as quickly as you can,'" he said. "Contraflow is the logical solution."

Mahmassani said that portable electronic signs could be used to implement such a plan and that buses could be given priority in the opened-up lanes.

The other key to a successful evacuation, he said, is to control the flow of traffic onto highways so that traffic doesn't clump up and come to a stop. One way to do that, he said, would be to phase any evacuation by neighborhood.

Mahmassani said the western part of the Baltimore area should be able to evacuate relatively smoothly. He said most of the problems would come on the east side - much of it on peninsulas and dependent on the Key Bridge, Harbor Tunnel and Fort McHenry Tunnel.

"Those are very vulnerable points," he said.

Whatever the obstacles, Mahmassani expressed confidence that "with some good management" an evacuation could be accomplished much more smoothly than in Houston - where, he said, virtually everything was done wrong except the early evacuation call.

But another University of Maryland transportation specialist was more skeptical.

"It's inevitable you're going to have something like Houston," said Kelly Clifton, a professor of urban planning.

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[Illustration]

Photo(s); Caption: Hundreds of people wait in line for as long as three hours at a Texaco on Interstate 24 in Houston yesterday.; Credit: Lawrence Jenkins Getty Images

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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