

Hurricane Katrina Judicial Assessment Committee Preliminary Report issued

Sept. 15, 2005

The Mississippi Supreme Court on Thursday issued the Hurricane Katrina Judicial Assessment Committee Preliminary Report detailing damages to courts in Gulf Coast counties and the status of court operations in those counties.

A copy of the report is available on the News page of the Supreme Court's web site at www.mssc.state.ms.us.

On Sept. 6, 2005, Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr. appointed a committee to assess the damage to courts in those areas which were affected by Hurricane Katrina. The Katrina Judicial Assessment Committee is chaired by Supreme Court Justice James E. Graves Jr. and includes Court of Appeals Presiding Judge Joe Lee, Supreme Court Clerk Betty Sephton, Administrative Office of Courts Director Kevin Lackey and Supreme Court Information Systems Director Michael Jones. The Committee visited courthouse in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties on Monday, Sept. 12.

Justice Graves said, "The damage ranged from light to heavy. I am optimistic that the courts in all affected areas will be operational at least at some level by Sept. 19."

Justice Graves said, "What impressed me so much was the resilience of the court staff and judges and their willingness and readiness to get back to doing the job of public service."

No court personnel are known to have been killed or seriously physically injured, although some of their homes were destroyed or heavily damaged. They are working to resume court operations while at the same time many of them are dealing with enormous personal losses.

Court facilities in Hancock and Jackson counties sustained the heaviest damage. Repairs are underway at the courthouses in Bay St. Louis and Pascagoula. Both courthouses are closed.

The Hancock County Courthouse in Bay St. Louis has roof damage, and flooding soaked some parts of the building. The second floor courtroom sustained heavy damage and is not useable at this time. Hancock County Chancery Court Clerk Timothy Kellar reported water damage to Chancery Court records. Circuit Court records escaped damage.

Hancock County Circuit Court Clerk Pam Metzler estimated that it could be 30 to 60 days before the Circuit Court system can function in Hancock County. Metzler suggested opening a satellite office in space occupied by the Tax Assessor in the Kiln.

The Jackson County Courthouse in Pascagoula received extensive damage. The first floor, which houses the Chancery Court Clerk's Office and Chancery courtrooms, was flooded. The second floor, which houses the Circuit Court operations, received water damage from the building's sprinkler system.

Repair work is expected to take three to four weeks, said Jackson County Circuit Court Judge Kathy King Jackson. The Circuit and County courts will temporarily relocate to the Civic Center. Judge Jackson and Circuit Judge Robert Krebs said they expect to be able to resume hearings and bench trials in October. They expect that jury trials will be delayed until January.

Jackson County Circuit Clerk Joe Martin is accepting filings at a temporary location at the old courthouse, according to Judge Jackson. Chancery Clerk Terry Miller is accepting filings at a temporary office at the Fairgrounds in Pascagoula.

The Harrison County Courthouse in Gulfport had slight damage, and is operational. The Harrison County Courthouse in Biloxi had damage to the County Courtroom.

Circuit Judges in the Second Circuit Court District of Hancock, Harrison and Stone counties have cancelled trials and hearings and extended filing deadlines. A Circuit Court order filed Sept. 12 with the Mississippi Supreme Court noted that all motions, trials and hearings previously scheduled between Aug. 29 and Oct. 31 shall be rescheduled as soon as is practical. Harrison County Circuit and Chancery judges and offices of court clerks are expected to be in full operation by Monday, Sept. 19.

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