

Hurricane Matthew recovery grant: \$236M. Projects finished so far: Zero.

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RALEIGH — Months after lawmakers blasted Gov. Roy Cooper's administration for failing to spend any of a \$236.5 million federal grant to help Hurricane Matthew victims rebuild, no projects using the funds have been finished yet, North Carolina Emergency Management said last week.

The continued delays prompted House Speaker Tim Moore to announce Monday that he's reinstating a legislative oversight committee.

"As serious questions remain unanswered regarding the slow pace of the Cooper Administration's recovery effort, it's critical that we continue our committee's oversight to ensure folks get the help they need," said Rep. John Bell, a Wayne County Republican and chairman of the committee.

But Greg Thomas, a spokesman for NC Emergency Management, stressed that progress is being made with the \$236.5 million in federal Housing and Urban Development grant money.

"The federally-required environmental reviews are now complete for projects in Robeson County, and in August the three remaining most impacted counties' reviews (Edgecombe, Cumberland and Wayne) will be complete," he said in an email. "When these reviews are complete the county will be able to move forward with housing recovery projects."

The grant money (known as Community Development Block Grants, or CDBG) requires a complicated eight-step application process, and the state has received 1,982 applications so far.

About 950 of those have made it to the second of eight steps, while most of the rest are still on step one, which requires extensive documentation. "NCEM currently has seven open application centers to collect this information and in August will begin operating mobile centers to make getting this information easier for storm impacted persons," Thomas said.

Cooper was scheduled to visit the application center in Lenoir County Tuesday.

June was a busy month for another Hurricane Matthew relief fund, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. That's a FEMA-funded program to buy out, elevate or reconstruct property in floodprone areas impacted by the hurricane.

The state applied for \$100 million in grant money last October for more than 800 properties. So far, 627 properties have been approved, totaling \$79.7 million across 33 counties and municipalities, with conditional approvals for 14 others in Wayne County. Most of those awards were announced in June and early July. Thomas said remaining awards will be announced by the end of this month, with the exception of Princeville, which didn't submit its application to FEMA until June 28. "This process could take between 3-9 months from the time of submission to FEMA," he said.

The pace of recovery hasn't been fast enough for Rep. Brenden Jones, a Columbus County Republican who wrote to Moore on July 10 asking for the House disaster relief committee to meet again. Jones wrote that he wants the committee to "review and discuss the appropriate measures moving forward.

North Carolina stands to lose millions of federal dollars because of the Governor's tepid response. We must continue to do everything in our power to hold this administration accountable."

Jones cited a WBTV report about Emergency Management missing a self-imposed deadline to begin construction on the first projects using the HUD grant money. The report referred to a statement at an April House disaster relief committee, when the assistant director for resiliency, Nick Burk, told lawmakers that he hoped construction would begin by June 30.

Burk has since left the job and his replacement is starting work this week. John Ebbighausen will now oversee grant funding and various disaster relief programs. He'd previously worked for the N.C. National Guard and has 28 years of military experience in strategic planning, operations, contract management and command, according to Emergency Management.

The newly reinstated House Select Committee on Disaster Relief hasn't yet scheduled its next meeting. But Moore said he's appointing additional committee members: Rep. Larry Strickland, R-Johnston, Rep. Bob Muller, R-Pender, Rep. Howard Hunter, D-Hertford, and Rep. William Brisson, R-Bladen.

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