

Blue Water Highway is one bumpy cruise

Brazoria County officials warn restoring coastal road will be slow, expensive

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Brazoria County's Blue Water Highway was washed out in several places by Hurricane Ike. Motorists face numerous obstacles on the road.

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SURFSIDE BEACH — The Brazoria County coastal road called the Blue Water Highway is being called the Blue Water Pig Trail now. Hurricane Ike chewed away about 4 miles of County Road 257, leaving what looks like bomb craters in some areas, sending drivers off to mud and sand tracks in some places and even onto the beach, where the road has been turned into rubble.

The highway has long been popular with tourists wanting to drive along the coast. Without it, the usual 37-mile-long scenic trip between downtown Galveston and Freeport is more than 76 miles, forcing drivers to go around several bays to go through Hitchcock. The destruction has all but severed the connection of a beach subdivision called Treasure Island near San Luis Pass with the rest of Brazoria County. It also carried away the electric power lines serving the 220 houses.

"It sure is quiet now," said Jim Coursey, looking at the empty highway that once carried a lot of tourist traffic. "I never realized you could see so many stars at night."

Coursey, manager of the Treasure Island Municipal Utility District, has lived full time at Treasure Island for 11 years. Most of the houses are weekend and vacation places owned by people who live in other towns, he said. Only about 30 full-time residents are in the subdivision.

"We're pretty resourceful," he said.

Driving the "Pig Trail" is like something out of a safari.

Barriers, police tape and cones warn of the sudden dropoffs. Plastic pipe markers line rutted trails around the worst areas.

At one point the markers send drivers off onto the beach for about a mile before leading to a sandy trail back to the pavement. At another place a second trail flanks a set of deep muddy ruts, leading drivers along a grassy, bouncy route that avoids the ruts that would bog down most pickup trucks.

"The main thing to remember is when you hit loose sand, just keep on going," Coursey said. "Don't ever stop."

The utility district is slowly rebuilding the water system and now Galveston city water is flowing to most homes. Some homes have telephone service and some don't, Coursey said. "Everybody uses cell phones."

Getting back and forth to grocery stores is a bit tougher, he said.

Most locals shop in Clute or Lake Jackson, about 25 miles away.

But now only pickup trucks and four-wheel-drive vehicles can negotiate the trail around the washed-out road areas.

A trip to Lake Jackson via the San Luis Pass bridge, FM 3005 and Galveston is about 100 miles.

"Nobody wants to go to Galveston," he said. "There's all kinds of problems over there."

Repairing the highway will be very expensive, said Brazoria County Engineer Gerald Roberts. To do it right and protect it from future washouts from the surf with sand dunes or rock revetments could cost as much as \$100 million, he said.

The county hopes FEMA will pay most of that, but even the 25 percent local match would equal Roberts' department's budget for a whole year. That would leave nothing for maintenance for Brazoria County's 1,100 miles of other roads.

"We're working with the state now to see if there are some other funds we can get to pay the local match," Roberts said.

The current "pig trail" may have to last for several months, Roberts said.

He is hoping to build a temporary gravel road that would be high enough to provide all-weather access. But even that will cost about \$3 million and probably won't be completed until early next year, he said.

The Blue Water Highway needs to be restored, said Surfside Beach Police Chief Randy Smith, who also is the head of emergency services for Treasure Island.

"We can get an ambulance down there," he said, "but it would be a bumpy ride."

It's common for vehicles to get stuck, he said. "The other day we had to pull out a wrecker," Smith said.

Treasure Island may be isolated, but it remains safe, Coursey said.

Brazoria County deputies man a roadblock on the Surfside Beach end of the highway and Galveston police have one on the San Luis Pass bridge. They turn away people who can't exhibit a reason to go to the area — as well as those in small cars not likely to make the trip.

"These days we're seeing mainly insurance adjusters coming through," said an officer at the Galveston checkpoint.

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