

Business aid center open in time for storm season

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As images from Louisiana Earth — a Google Web software package — panned behind him, Ramesh Kolluru welcomed scores of people to a new emergency operations center on LSU's South Campus that will speed business recovery after hurricanes and other disasters.

But Kolluru's thoughts were chasing him back to Acadiana, where he directs a University of Louisiana at Lafayette institute that's training its eyes on the hurricane season that began this week.

In 2005, hurricanes Katrina and Rita literally spawned the National Incident Management Systems and Advanced Technologies Institute. On Kolluru's Wednesday drive from the institute to Baton Rouge, he found inspiration in a billboard, a sign of the stern stuff that drives public and private leaders to respond to crises, to do something much more than sit and wait for the next hurricane.

The sign pictured the pacifist Dalai Lama of Tibet.

"He didn't wish for peace, he worked for peace," Kolluru said.

Wednesday's unveiling of the Louisiana Business Emergency Operations Center on GSRI Avenue followed months of remodeling and years of planning. In a command center, captains of industry and trade organizations will work at 40 computer terminals, watch emergency updates from three overhead projectors and use video-conferencing, wireless computer networks and electric generators to synchronize their efforts for rebuilding Louisiana after a natural or manmade disaster.

Unlike civil defense sites for governments and utilities, the new center is strictly business. Corporations contributed much of the equipment and capital investment in a more than \$1 million project that included a \$250,000 contribution Wednesday from Entergy Corp., said Joe Booth, executive director of the LSU Stephenson Disaster Management Institute that will operate the emergency center. Up to 5,000 square feet of technology-laden space will be available.

Stephen Moret, the state's economic development secretary, said the center isn't merely new to Louisiana, it's the first U.S. center dedicated expressly to business and industry needs after a disaster.

"It's really about supporting the continuity of business operations," he said. "With the help of ULL and

LSU, we're going to be able to do that quicker than ever before. Louisiana literally has the potential to create a model for the entire country."

Booth said the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, or GOHSEP, and Moret's Louisiana Economic Development department would provide instruction about which business and emergency leaders gain seats at the center's terminals. GOHSEP, LED and other agencies would supply ongoing intelligence about disasters, along with LSU's Stephenson Disaster Management Institute and the ULL institute.

In addition to training and response efforts, the Business Emergency Operations Center will develop economic impact estimates of disasters within 48 hours, allowing Louisiana to gain assistance sooner from FEMA, the Small Business Administration and other federal agencies, Moret said.

Among the trade groups who'll occupy seats at the emergency center are the Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance, Greater New Orleans Inc., the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, the Louisiana Bankers Association, the South Louisiana Economic Council, the Louisiana Chemical Association, the North Louisiana Economic Partnership, the Louisiana Restaurant Association, the Louisiana Hospital Association and the Louisiana Motor Transport Association.

Near the center, a \$43 million Louisiana National Guard training center is nearing completion, and LSU wants to establish the South Campus as a major research park, a goal with which the emergency business center fits well.

"We don't wish disasters on anyone," LSU Chancellor Mike Martin said, "but we look for the day when disasters occur somewhere on the planet and people look to Louisiana for answers."

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