

April 29, 2006

EOC renovation nearly complete

By Linda Way / contributing writer

If you want to see a smile cross David Sharp's face, just ask him about the work that has been done to the new Emergency Operations Center building.

The "EOC" will be at the old BellSouth building, 2525 14th St.

Sharp, director of the Lauderdale County Emergency Management Agency, said the building is now 95 percent remodeled. It will house Meridian's Department of Homeland Security and LEMA.

"The city and the county used to be housed in two different locations," Sharp said.

"When Katrina happened, we had to send someone from our building over to the county, or the county had to send someone from their building over here to the city - because that was the only way we had to communicate. Now we are only separated by a wall.

"This building was designed to withstand an earthquake, and you will find 2-foot-wide beams, reinforced with steel, throughout the building. They go about 35 feet into the ground. The walls are approximately 2 feet wide, and there is a tunnel underneath if we need protection from a tornado. This building was built to a higher standard than FEMA 320 standards on safe rooms."

Renovations include a new training room and an auditorium that can seat 75 to 85 people; the auditorium will also be used as a briefing room for the media. There is a communications center that will have a place for amateur radio operators; that part of the EOC will be operated by LEMA and the local HAM Radio Club.

A weather radio computer system will issue warnings and alert firefighters if a tornado is spotted.

Another room is lined with telephones for department heads like the police chief, Red Cross director, fire chief or Homeland Security director.

"Communications was one of our major problems during Katrina, and when our repeater went down we could not communicate over our radios. We now have a backup repeater so if the current one goes down, we can be back up and running within five minutes," Sharp said.

"A small generator was all that we had before, and it would not power half of our equipment, but the new generator can power the whole building. And if it goes down, we have a backup for that. You can't be prepared for everything, but we are about as prepared as you can get."

The move-in is expected to start next week, Sharp said, and will be completed by May 20.

Ken Storms, chief administrative officer for the city of Meridian, stressed that although the city and county will be in one building, they are still separate entities.

"The city of Meridian will still be protected and served by a full-time, well-trained, equipped and ready-to-serve work force - and if the county needs our help we will, as always, be there to help."