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Hurricane Central: Ike

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Sea

Ike washes away Texas City Dike

Little remains of the popular fishing location

By ROSANNA RUIZ Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle
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MAYRABELTRÁN CHRONICLE

A work crew drives out of the deserted Texas City Dike on Wednesday. Hurricane Ike devastated the attraction, destroying businesses and roads. The location remains closed indefinitely.

TEXAS CITY — A pair of crab tongs, a table and wood posts jutting from the bay are all that's left of Curl's Bait Camp.

Hurricane Ike consumed the shop and every other structure along the Texas City Dike. Part of the paved road was washed out and its bait shops, piers and boat ramps are gone.

Once hailed as the world's longest manmade fishing pier, the five-mile barrier — originally envisioned as a bulwark against sediment accumulation in Galveston Bay — is in such disrepair that city leaders say it will remain closed indefinitely.

The future is equally unclear for three businesswomen who owned bait shops along the dike, a popular spot for anglers, boaters and birders.

"It's the only thing I know how to do," said Dorothy Curl Rilat, 51, who has spent almost a lifetime behind the counter at Curl's. She began working there when she was a little girl after her father, Daniel Curl, built the place in 1967, Rilat said.

A previous hurricane ripped off the store's roof, but that was easily fixed. This time there is nothing left to rebuild.

The Lighted Fishing Pier, at the end of the dike, was washed out, too.

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Considering options

Trisha Bell, who owned the pier and its bait shop and cafe, has not been able to see what's left. It's too far down the dike, all of which has been closed for safety reasons.

From the concrete barrier at the dike's entrance, she could see what became of the other bait shops and can only imagine what Ike did to her place. She and husband Doug Bell are the pier's third owners

and continued the tradition of juicy hamburgers for which the cafe long has been known.

On Friday, she said, police will escort her to the site where the 600-foot-long pier once stood.

"It was my heartbeat," Bell said. "It's what I did every day. I feel like I've lost a loved one."

Anita Collins, who owned Anita's Bait Camp, said she cried for three days.

"I think I cried enough," she said, "Life goes on."

She also has had to devote most of her energy to her Dickinson Bayou home, which was heavily damaged by Ike.

"I don't know what they're going to let me do," she said of city leaders. "Right now, they don't have time to even think about what they're going to do with the dike."

Doug Hoover, Texas City's executive director of management services, said city leaders remain focused on the removal of storm debris, among other priorities.

Commercial development along the dike long has been a topic of discussion. Ike now has forced the matter.

"This will give us the opportunity to sit back and consider our options," Hoover said.

Ike, he said, completely flattened the dike that has evolved since its early days in the 1900s as a distribution hub for the railroad industry. The Army Corps of Engineers determined the peninsula needed to be extended to provide a buffer for the Houston Ship Channel. Granite stones, roadway, park space and other additions were made.

"I think the dike has some great potential," said Jimmy Hayley, president of the Texas City-La Marque Chamber of Commerce.

Taking a look

People remain drawn to the dike. But now, they just stop and stare.

Texas City resident Charles Parker, 63, said he last fished there about a month ago. He chuckled when he said he didn't catch anything.

"It will be a couple of years before they get things back up here," he said.

Lino Tobar, 65, and his grandson, Bryan Pennington, 15, had to see what was left of the dike for themselves. A welcome sign stands defiantly a few yards from a debris line that marks the water's high point.

"If it weren't for that sign, you wouldn't know what you were looking at," Tobar said.

The dike should be restored, he said.

"This is our backyard."

rosanna.ruiz@chron.com



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