

Ex-FEMA head gives stormy report

BY KATIE RUMBAUGH
STAFF WRITER

Images of natural disasters on television are nothing compared to what it looks like on the ground, a former FEMA director said Wednesday.

James Lee Witt, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency from 1993 to 2001, has seen it firsthand.

Witt was the keynote speaker at Wednesday's Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce meeting at the Carolina Club.

About 450 members of the chamber listened intently as he discussed his experiences reforming FEMA during the Clinton administration and the problems the agency faced when dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

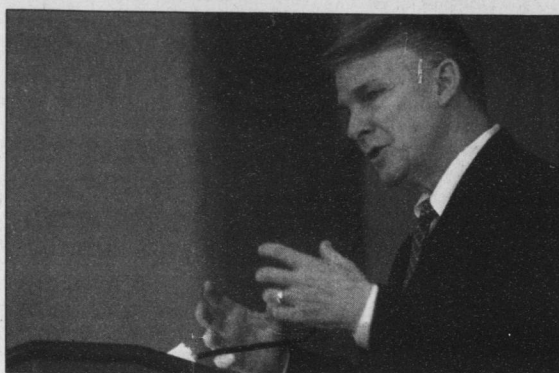
Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco hired Witt to oversee reconstruction efforts after Katrina.

"Two-hundred-forty-five thousand homes in Louisiana — gone," Witt said. "Eighteen thousand businesses — gone. The tax base for every single parish — gone."

"It is the United States' tsunami, the worst thing I've ever seen. Everything in Cameron Parish was gone except the courthouse."

Hurricane Katrina displaced 1.5 million people and inflicted an estimated \$75 billion worth of damage, making it the most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history.

Though he stopped short of criticizing the Bush administration or FEMA employees, Witt addressed the government's unpreparedness for a hurricane of Katrina's force.



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James Lee Witt, the director of FEMA for eight years, addressed the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday morning.

"President Bush gave \$3 billion to build levees, but they only were built for a Category 3 hurricane," he said. "We need to take the next step to build the levees up to category five."

FEMA is no longer a separate government agency but is part of the Department of Homeland Security, which was formed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The agency has received criticism for its perceived slow response to Katrina last August and for its inefficiency in evacuating and providing care for residents.

Many, including Witt, say being a part Homeland Security severely impairs FEMA's effectiveness.

"We need to re-look at FEMA as an agency and put it back together as independent," he said.

Witt said he will testify in the investigative hearings about FEMA's handling of the Katrina crisis.

"It wasn't thought through as it should be," he said.

Several chamber members echoed Witt's sentiments.

"I totally agreed with Mr. Witt," said Cynthia Edwards-Paschall, director of marketing for PlayMakers Repertory Company.

Edwards-Paschall said she was disappointed by federal handling of relief.

"It is a shame that the wealthiest nation in the world had to respond in such a way," she said. "It was an embarrassment."

Contact the State & National Editor at stntdesk@unc.edu.

Partnership receives surveys, approves budget

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The Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership heard the results of a survey it deployed on the implementation of wireless Internet access downtown Wednesday.

Results presented by Shannon Schelin of the UNC School of Government show that 70 percent of businesses that responded to the survey are interested in municipal wireless.

The partnership decided to delegate its executive director, Liz Parham, to work with other stakeholders to come up with suitable models. Gregg Gerdau, the town's

technology committee, chairman, said his committee is preparing a presentation for the Chapel Hill Town Council.

MO' MONEY

The partnership also approved a \$132,000 budget Wednesday.

The approved budget includes appropriations for personnel costs, operating costs and projects such as the creation of a giving kiosk, for which the partnership received an \$8,000 private donation.

Parham also told the group that the Internal Revenue Service has requested more information

about the partnership's 501(c)3 tax exemption status. Parham said she is working with a D.C. attorney to clear up the situation.

SO FRESH AND SO CLEAN

Following a series of clean and safe audits of the downtown, Parham brought the group a list of proposed action steps for improving the aesthetics and general security. Nancy Sutterfield, vice chancellor of finance and administration for UNC, suggested that the partnership institutionalize the inspections.

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