



N NEWS
UPDATE

FEMA reverses on school shelters

New plan would not require demolition

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The Federal Emergency Management Agency is scrapping an unpopular policy that could have led some Al-

abama schools to tear down newly constructed storm shelters, two members of the state's congressional delegation said Tuesday.

FEMA is paying three-quarters of the \$1.5 million cost to install the shelters at four schools in DeKalb, Franklin, Marion and Tuscaloosa counties. But the shelters were tied to the school campuses' need for temporary classrooms, and FEMA had said schools had three options when the damaged schools were repaired or re-

placed: Buy the temporary shelters at a fair-market price, sell them and give the money to FEMA, or tear them down.

The choices sparked outrage among school officials, who said they wouldn't be able to afford the full expense of the storm shelters. It also sparked action by some members of Alabama's congressional delegation, who asked President Barack Obama

See FEMA, Page 4A

AGE ONE

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FEMA:

From Page 1A

last month to suspend the policy and introduced legislation to block FEMA from forcing schools to pay the federal government a premium to keep the shelters.

In a news release late Tuesday, U.S. Reps. Spencer Bachus, R-Vestavia Hills, and Robert Aderholt, R-Haleyville, said they'd been informed that FEMA had developed a plan that would allow the schools to keep the shelters. The release said Bachus and Aderholt "have been assured by representatives of FEMA Director Craig Fugate that there is no threat of storm shelters being torn down or moved."

Both congressmen referred questions about details of the plan to FEMA.

FEMA offered no details of the changes Tuesday evening. "We are continuing to work closely with the state, local officials, the school districts and members of Congress to provide solutions that will work for everyone," FEMA spokesman Mike Stone said. "Our priority and focus remains on supporting disaster survivors as effectively as possible, and in this case that means making sure that the students and school staff have access to safe shelter while their schools are being rebuilt."

Art Faulkner, director of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency, was briefed Tuesday afternoon on the issue. While there are still details to iron out over the next week or so, he said, the bottom line is that FEMA has agreed the shelters won't have to be paid for, moved or torn down.

"They've assured us they will be able to work around the issue in some form or fashion," he said.

In DeKalb County, the solution is simply a matter of paying for the shelter under a different FEMA program, Faulkner said. For shelters that are already further along in the process, that may not be possible, he said.

Faulkner said he was pleased that federal officials were able to work together for a solution "in the best interest of everyone involved."

"The most important thing is getting them built," he said. "If they're not built, we cannot protect our children and our teachers."

A shift in FEMA's approach was welcomed news to DeKalb County Superintendent Charles Warren, who had been one of the most vocal critics of the old policy, which he said was "not a wise use of taxpayer dollars."

"I never wanted to cause anybody any headaches," Warren said late Tuesday af-

ternoon. "But I didn't want to see a half-million-dollar safe room torn down."

The safe room for Plainview School is now under construction in Bessemer, and Warren has said the shelter could benefit students and the larger Rainville community long after temporary classrooms are gone.

"That's what I've been working toward," he said.

Bachus, a longtime advocate for community storm shelters, said in a statement that offering protection to citizens has become even more important after the violent tornado outbreak in April.

"It never made sense to tear down perfectly good storm shelters, and it's a relief that option is totally off the table," Bachus said in a statement.

Aderholt, who is chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, which oversees FEMA, praised the agency and its director for "ensuring that the bureaucratic process (will) not stand in the way of safety."

Aderholt's district includes three of the four schools affected by the policy. In addition to Plainview, his district includes high schools in Hackleburg and Phil Campbell.

The fourth shelter is going to Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools.