

Houston owners holding on for damage assessments

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Property owners in Houston likely will have to wait several more days to see how their properties are faring in the wake of the devastation of Tropical Storm Harvey, which hit the Gulf Coast hard on Friday.

“Clients with Houston area assets are calling seeking inspection services to simply view their properties and get a basic assessment of the wind and storm surge-related damage. Although there are limitations and literal roadblocks to mobilizing local property condition and environmental assessors, it’s a reasonable avenue to pursue even this soon to get a handle on the damage,” said **Bob Geiger**, principal at **Partner Engineering & Science**, which provides due diligence services for commercial real estate lenders and investors.

That said, it’s likely to be several more days before any assessments are possible. “Drone pilots are heading to the area but realistically due to airspace restrictions and coordination with FEMA, it will likely be next week before a drone legally is in the air,” Geiger said. “The Texas Military is warning that civilian drones are posing an extreme risk to rescue pilots and crews in high need areas. Updated satel



lite imagery is another more limited resolution option, but that of course needs to wait until after the clouds clear.”

There are a number of things that owners will need to assess. “Structural conditions, water damage, air quality, microbial growth, and potentially hazardous building or other materials need be carefully evaluated in an around the property for obvious safety reasons, and to outline a proper and cost-effective remedial

approach,” Geiger said.

The damage from the storm underscores the importance of proper hurricane preparedness for commercial property owners. “The Gulf Coast and East Coast areas hadn’t experienced a major, costly hurricane in many years,” Geiger said, adding that it’s been possible that owners experienced a false sense of security.

There’s been substantial development over the past five to 10 years in many East and Gulf Coast markets and many properties may not have been prepared for the risks associated with hurricanes, which include wind, rainwater, and storm surges. “Development has charged ahead, sometimes without the appropriate precautions,” Geiger said.

There are some easy steps that building owners can take, including having emergency generators ready to go on site. “Some buildings will be pre-programmed to shift into emergency mode, which could include an emergency shutdown and activating emergency cameras for assessing and monitoring conditions during a natural disaster,” Geiger said. “Many smart office spaces are designed to regulate nearly all systems in an integrated fashion for ease and sustainability.” But shutting down a building’s systems could also make it more vulnerable to a cyber or other attack, he added.

More lenders, investors, and owners are looking at predictive assessments for potential or probable wind damage, with Geiger noting that there’s not uniform industry standard for assessing windstorm losses and damage in hurricane zones that’s similar to guidelines for seismic events.

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