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RTA buses would be used for evacuation **But plan still falls far short of needs**

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By Bruce Nolan
Staff writer

New Orleans has plans to deploy scores of buses from the Regional Transit Authority to evacuate people without transportation if Hurricane Dennis threatens the city, City Hall said on Thursday.

Such an effort would be both unprecedented and, apparently, far short of the city's needs.

At the same time, it appears emergency planners' efforts to establish church-led private transportation networks have fallen flat.

Surveys of the city's largest churches and of the Archdiocese of New Orleans indicated Thursday that most have no plans to gather church members or others and move them out of town in church vans or buses.

But the Archdiocese of New Orleans said it would evacuate the residents of its nursing homes and other health facilities.

Emergency planners may announce today whether they will trigger the RTA evacuation. That will depend on the course and location of Dennis, said Tami Frazier, spokeswoman for Mayor Ray Nagin.

The city assumes residents will look first to family and friends for rides out of the city, she said.

If events warrant evacuation, the Regional Transit Authority will contribute part of its 364-bus fleet to an effort that will end at undisclosed shelters north of Lake Pontchartrain, RTA spokeswoman Rosalind Cook said.

Not all the buses will be available, she cautioned. "We might be talking about as many as 100," she said.

The agency would hold much of its fleet back to continue operating on city streets until forced to shut down by a city curfew. The number of evacuation buses is further limited by the number of volunteer drivers who sign up to drive them away, she said.

Even if the entire fleet was used, the buses would carry only about 22,000 people out of the city - far short of the 134,000 people estimated to be without cars in a recent University of New Orleans study.

In past years planners have talked about recruiting churches and their small private fleets into an

evacuation effort. The idea, called Operation Brother's Keeper, has largely withered in the face of the complexity of the details, said Kay Wilkins, a spokeswoman for the American Red Cross.

The state Legislature last year killed a bill to give immunity from liability to any person or organization providing free transportation during an emergency, except in cases of gross negligence. Critics of the bill said volunteers could be covered by insurance and questioned whether the proposal would be constitutional.

The Rev. William Maestri, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, said some church parishes may be mounting local evacuation efforts, but those would be announced through parish communication outlets.

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