New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said Tuesday he plans to order a mandatory evacuation for most hurricanes with Category 2 strength - a storm with winds exceeding 96 mph -- or stronger this year, and that the Superdome will no longer be available as a refuge of last resort.

"A mandatory evacuation will be called in the future, as we know the threats will be coming," Nagin said. "We have direct lines in to the National Hurricane Center, and we will coordinate at the state and federal level to give enough time for our citizens to reach safety."

Those without transportation will be picked up at locations around the city by Regional Transit Authority buses and delivered to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, where they will be transferred to other buses destined for shelters elsewhere in Louisiana or in neighboring states, Nagin said.

Nagin said RTA drivers would be declared essential personnel and would be required to report to work in the event of a hurricane.

Neither the Superdome nor the Convention Center will be used as a refuge, he said.

"It is a strong plan to protect the lives and property of New Orleans during hurricanes and other disasters," Nagin said.

Nagin said the plan is built on the lessons learned from Katrina. Asked whether his successor would keep the plan if he is voted out of office on May 20, Nagin said there would be little time to write a new plan, and his administration's work would be in place.

Nagin said he is likely to order an evacuation 30 to 36 hours before the eye of the hurricane comes ashore near the city, in line with the state plan that coordinates New Orleans' evacuation with other southeastern Louisiana parishes.

Residents living in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers will be asked to evacuate even in the event of a tropical storm, he said. The city is working with the American Red Cross to identify shelters capable of withstanding the wind and rains expected from such storms. Potential sites include buildings at the University of New Orleans and the Municipal Auditorium.

Federal help needed

Nagin's plan, announced at a morning news conference at City Hall, relies on the kindness of state and federal officials.
City emergency preparedness officials told state officials as early as Tuesday morning that they have only 80 RTA buses with which to evacuate the 10,000 people Nagin estimates have returned to the city without transportation, and the city cannot guarantee enough drivers, said Col. Jeff Smith, director of the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

"The (state) Department of Transportation and Development is working with them to see what their shortage will be," Smith said. "We're diligently working to have contracts in place with other school systems and with commercial carriers to make up the distance.

"We're also on record as requesting that FEMA pre-stage buses in Louisiana for that purpose," he said. Smith said the state also is asking FEMA to help identify "megashelters" for those evacuated by bus.

Nagin said organizations that volunteered buildings as shelters during Katrina became concerned about the amount of time they were unable to use their facilities. One alternative, he said, would be to have FEMA identify a regional facility that could be used by Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, such as Camp Shelby, a National Guard military reservation in south-central Mississippi south of Hattiesburg.

Nagin praised federal Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff for "his intervention" in getting Amtrak to agree to use its trains to transport "special needs" evacuees -- those with chronic medical problems -- and the elderly from Union Station in downtown New Orleans, but he said the city is still negotiating a memorandum of agreement confirming that plan. The evacuation plan for the chronically ill is necessary because the city has decided against opening a special needs shelter at the Superdome.

Smith said he has had similar discussions with Chertoff about using Amtrak, which were followed up with a request letter from Gov. Kathleen Blanco, "but we have not received assurances that that's a done deal."

Police presence promised

If the city is evacuated, Police Supt. Warren Riley said, intersections will be patrolled by National Guard soldiers and police officers. Those soldiers and police will seek shelter when winds reach 55 mph, then resume patrols against looting and violence as the winds drop off, he said. The city has requested 3,000 National Guard troops, he said.

A curfew will be in place from the time a mandatory evacuation is ordered, and anyone caught outside will be arrested, Riley said.

"We want to create an atmosphere where it makes more sense to leave than to stay," said Terry Ebbert, director of the city's Office of Homeland Security.
Nagin said Chertoff also has assisted in persuading commercial air carriers to hold off on canceling flights out of the city and to provide additional planes to evacuate stranded tourists and others who already have tickets. The city is still negotiating those arrangements, he said.

Nagin said the new plan also will allow residents to bring their pets onto evacuation buses, as long as the pets are in cages.

Ebbert said New Orleans will be "tested" on the new plan by its national counterpart on May 23 and May 24 with a tabletop exercise and live drill in the city.

Nagin said that residents choosing to stay in their homes despite a mandatory evacuation order would not be required to leave.

"We're dealing with adults," Nagin said. "If you decide to disobey a mandatory evacuation and don't leave, you are confining yourself to your home in an emergency. If you come outside and violate the curfew, you will be arrested."

Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, Nagin's opponent in the mayoral runoff, was critical of the time it took for Nagin to announce a detailed hurricane plan for the city.

"I'm concerned that it took the mayor eight months to announce this plan," Landrieu said. "It's worth noting that this will be the mayor's fifth hurricane season. In 2004, Hurricane Ivan's near-miss exposed serious flaws with the city's plan for evacuation and shelter of last resort. These same issues haunted our city during Hurricane Katrina."

Nagin kicked off what he said would be an unprecedented effort to educate the public about the need to make plans in advance of the June 1 start of hurricane season by naming May the city's first hurricane preparedness month.

He urged residents to sit down with their families now to draw up family emergency plans. Plans should include when and where family members should meet in the event of an evacuation, to where they should evacuate and what they should bring, including money, important papers, food and health-related supplies.

Brochures on how to write family emergency plans, trailer safety, evacuating with special needs and the elderly, with pets, when pregnant and how to volunteer in emergencies are all available on the city's Web site, www.cityofno.com , and at public libraries and other locations around the city.

The city also is offering classes and guest speakers on emergency planning by calling 1-877-286-6431. Callers should ask the operator for evacuation information. The classes and brochures are available in Spanish and the brochures will be available in Vietnamese by June.
Individuals with special needs are asked to register with the city by calling the same number and asking for evacuation registration. They will be asked several questions to determine their eligibility. Generally, people are eligible if they have no or unreliable transportation, cannot afford fuel or hotel costs, or have medical, physical or psychological conditions that could prevent them from evacuating.

Kay Wilkins, chief executive of the New Orleans chapter of the American Red Cross, said after Nagin's news conference that her agency is assisting the city in reinvigorating Operation Brother's Keeper, a program aimed at getting church groups to assist their members and neighbors in evacuating.

Evacuation plan includes buses, trains, planes