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Long-Term Recovery Planning: What You Need to Know

By: Adam Stone on May 15, 2013

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A dam break, caused by flooding in 2008, destroyed these Wisconsin houses. Photo by Robert Kaufmann/FEMA

One day something large and very bad will happen in Los Angeles. That's a given. With training and preparation, emergency managers will be ready to respond on that day. What comes next, however, is a topic seldom discussed.

Whether in advance of a crisis or in the wake of a disaster, [long-term planning](#) is both vital and often overlooked. How will the community survive and thrive 10 years down the road, or 20 years?

"The thing about that kind of recovery is the fact that it is so big. It is so difficult for people to wrap their heads around, thinking of everybody that is involved and what their role is going to be," said Ryan Rockabrand, program specialist in the Office of Emergency Management for Los Angeles County.

And yet the work must be done. How does long-term planning happen? It starts with partnership-building, encompasses economic revitalization and ultimately keeps a community viable. It's up to emergency management to bring all those pieces

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Assembling the Team

The floods in historic Gays Mills, Wis., demonstrate the need for partnerships. In 2007 and 2008, the village drew presidential disaster declarations when the Kickapoo River twice overflowed its banks. In planning the community's return, [Wisconsin Emergency Management](#) drew together a diverse group of state and federal players, historic and cultural organizations, environmental groups, economic development officials, public facility managers, urban planning experts and landscape architects.

"You have to get all the leadership on board," said Brian Satula, administrator of Wisconsin Emergency Management. "As the representatives of the community, you need their support for whatever plan is going to be developed. They are the ones on the front lines who will be answering the questions."

The [Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs](#) (ADECA) has been leaning on such teams since a series of tornadoes in 2011 took out 31 of 32 businesses and much of the housing in Hackleburg. In forging a five-year recovery plan, the agency has drawn extensively upon community relationships that were established before the storms, including university scholars who have helped fill the dearth of planners and engineers that a bigger city might have been able to work with.

"The role of emergency management is in making sure that network has been established prior to a disaster. That is essential to the success of that community, not only in the response but also in the recovery aspect," said Rocky Milliman, Disaster Recovery coordinator at ADECA.

While all agree that interagency relationships, paired with ties to local community organizations, are vital to long-term recovery, it's equally true that establishing such ties requires some finesse. Partnership means more than just the occasional tabletop exercise.

First, success requires broad thinking. "I am not an advocate of specifying individuals within each agency," Rockabrand said. While personal ties help cement cooperation, "ultimately it's not about a name. It's about a mission or a function. Ten years from now, those particular individuals probably aren't going to be there."

To add real depth to these ties, sustainability is required. "Once you create that plan, then you do the exercises and revisit the plan. All that needs to be routine," Rockabrand said. "It has to go into that full cycle repeatedly until it becomes second nature."

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Second nature means knowing intuitively what aspects of recovery are going to kick in when it's time to draw up a long-term plan. What, then, are the aspects of [long-term recovery](#)?

Money Comes First

It would be nice to be able to say, "Here's what goes into a long-term plan." But that's not the case. "It's really hard to say in the abstract," said James C. Schwab, manager of the [Hazards Planning Research Center of the American Planning Association](#). "It's going to depend on the type, size and scale of the disaster, the spectrum of damages. All these will have a significant impact on the recovery choices you are going to make."

For any given disaster, the extent and the form of the damage can vary widely, which will directly impact how long-term recovery is organized. Even for communities with mature recovery plans, the unexpected will often call for revisions on the fly.

That being said, there are some things that can be assumed in the broadest sense, first among these being that economic redevelopment will play a central role in recovery over the long haul.

A principal associate with planning and development consultancy Hamilton Swift and Associates, Charles Eadie led long-term recovery of Santa Cruz, Calif., after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake when economic recovery played a central role. "The issue was primarily that the beloved downtown, a historic district, was devastated in both a commercial and aesthetic point of view. There are 1 million square feet, and a third of it was demolished, a third was OK and a third was in between," he said. "It left gaping holes in the downtown."

It took 18 months to forge a plan that would combine insurance money, government investment and private spending with an eye toward rebuilding. "Recovery is really about one thing: It's about investment and reinvestment," Eadie said.



Adam Stone

Adam Stone is a contributing writer for Emergency Management magazine.

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BobW | Commented 5 Days Ago

A motivational article but "Nothing is new under the Sun". I wouldn't call all the parties at the Treaty of Versailles "the Team". This allows me to say "environmental groups" and "economic development officials" can have antagonistic relationships throughout the "partnership". Public facility managers are tied to their state legislatures (w/ exceptions[eg some port authorities]) and Congress. ... Yes, "Money Comes First". Will the devastated airport be rehabed or closed so as to build a new regional super-airport to support the new aircraft models? Try a table-top exercise with a damaged hospital situation. If money comes first - it does - can coastal zoning laws be changed for recovery if this substantially lessens the counties' tax revenues? "Government investment" has competing demands. ... FEMA plans are not viable without an attached Congressional appropriation. The states don't have the \$\$\$\$. Today, for something far less complex, 37 states have yet to field the 2005 REAL ID Act mandate - because of lack of funds. Historic districts might as well convert to archeological sites. ... LA now has long term viable safety plans because their officials learned on site about recovery in "areas around the globe". Bhopal? or Cancun ? ... Money comes first.

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