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Hurricane Sandy Elevates the Importance of Mitigation Planning *Darrin Punchard, AICP*

Days before Hurricane Sandy made landfall along the East Coast of the United States, the late season “superstorm” spawned abundant discussion on the effects of climate change, sea level rise, and what has since been described as the “new normal” with regard to increasing incidents of extreme weather. In its devastating aftermath, many continue to wonder if we—as a society—will answer Mother Nature’s latest wake-up call.

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Flooding is especially difficult during recovery because damage is so widespread.



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While the damage and total loss figures from Sandy continue to be counted, the lessons learned along coastal areas of New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut are harsh and painfully clear. These lessons will likely serve to reshape coastal development patterns throughout the tristate region. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has already begun developing and promoting updated flood hazard maps with advisory base flood elevations; these are intended to assist local officials and property owners to rebuild structures to heights deemed more appropriate than current regulatory maps and development standards. State and local officials are engaging their communities in discussions regarding long-term recovery and redevelopment decisions. In some areas, residents are questioning the sense of rebuilding.

What lesson does Sandy hold for communities outside the tristate area? More than anything, it reinforces the need for possible—dare we say foreseeable—natural hazard events to be more seriously considered in local planning and community development decisions. As planners and commissioners we must do better in communicating hazard risks to local leaders and decision makers; we must become stronger advocates for practices and policies that minimize these risks both today and in the future.

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In recent years the notion of keeping natural hazards from becoming natural disasters has gained considerable national momentum. This is due, in part, to increases in the frequency, severity, and costs of high-profile disaster events, but also to a major planning initiative launched by FEMA in response to the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000. Since 2001, more than 27,000 communities nationwide have adopted local hazard mitigation plans in conformance with FEMA requirements, the goals of which are to reduce risk from potential natural events such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and wildfires.

Local hazard mitigation plans must be updated and approved by FEMA every five years in order for communities to remain eligible for federal hazard mitigation grant funds. Not surprisingly, most plans are geared toward regulatory compliance and the implementation of structural, grant-funded projects to correct mistakes of the past (for example, elevating, acquiring, or relocating flood-prone buildings, improving drainage systems, and other engineered solutions). The nonstructural measures recommended in these plans tend to include actions that support disaster preparedness and response activities. To date, little emphasis has been placed on what can be regarded as the most sustainable and most cost-effective hazard mitigation technique available to communities—that is, hazard avoidance through land-use planning.

In 2010, a research report for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Coastal Services Center identified the perceived barriers to hazard and resiliency planning among planners. First and foremost these barriers included the lack of public support or political will, noting that “planners’ work agendas are subject to external influence from elected officials and other community leaders” and that the demand for work on hazard resiliency is “minimal in most communities.” Other barriers cited included

limited budgets, competing priorities, limited actionable data, disconnects between emergency planners and planners, existing development and private property rights, and bias in favor of growth.

The consequences of Hurricane Sandy have removed some of these barriers along the Jersey Shore and other heavily impacted communities. The possible risk, as described in the risk assessment portion of existing local hazard mitigation plans, became the foreseeable risk, and then regrettably became the reality. The lesson here? Communities need not wait for a catastrophic event to take action.

Natural hazards present difficult problems and difficult solutions. Planners and commissioners should begin by considering the following:

- Assess natural hazards and existing community vulnerabilities. Get fully engaged in the development and implementation of the local hazard mitigation plan, and routinely seek opportunities to integrate mitigation into the devices and processes that guide community development. For example, begin by completing APA’s Safe Growth Audit.
- Build support for mitigation with local elected and appointed leaders by more effectively communicating not only hazard risks, but the benefits of resilience in a way that resonates with local public and private sector interests. Sell mitigation as good business practice, with investment returns that go beyond loss avoidance and contribute to other social, economic, and environmental policies.
- Make disaster prevention a core value of the community. Incorporate it into existing public agendas, vision, or mission statements, and into the goals or objectives of other plans and procedures. Empower local planning staff to vigorously consider natural hazards in their plan and project reviews.
- In planning for hazard risks, consider future conditions based on anticipated changes to the physical environment and natural systems. For example, require higher levels of protection (i.e., “freeboard”) for new development in flood hazard areas that could see an increase in FEMA base flood elevations due to urbanization, increased runoff, changing precipitation patterns, or sea level rise.
- Achieving true community resilience requires a sustained, holistic approach that includes a mix of structural and nonstructural measures for risk reduction. Solutions should be tailored to the community and not simply rely on minimum federal or state standards; they are more apt to be implemented if they are designed to achieve multiple community benefits.
- Expand predisaster mitigation planning to include postdisaster redevelopment issues. Plan for various disaster scenarios by establishing a framework and process for local decision making following an event, and adopt postdisaster recovery and redevelopment policies that are consistent with other plans well in advance.

In considering the above, planners and commissions should take advantage of the growing wealth of information and resources for local mitigation planning provided by federal agencies including FEMA and NOAA, State Hazard Mitigation Officers, nongovernmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, and professional associations such as APA and the Natural Hazard Mitigation Association. They should replicate best practices from comparable communities, as many case studies have been documented by these groups.

Human nature has long discounted risk by embracing the perception of “it can’t happen here.” Nevertheless, Mother Nature continues to prove millions of us wrong. Given the accessibility of data, tools, and technical resources, as well as the diplomatic skills to apply them, planning is positioned to respond and answer her latest call.