



Emergency Management Once Removed

By Jim Mullen

A Retrievable Legacy for Disaster Mitigation

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In 1997 James Lee Witt, Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), established a pilot program to reduce the human and economic cost of disasters. The purpose: incentivize the government, private sector, and the public to collaborate on the identification and reduction of a community's most serious natural disaster hazards.

That initiative was Project Impact. Seattle in late 1997 was among 7 jurisdictions chosen as a pilot site to demonstrate the effectiveness of Witt's vision. As a chosen "pilot" jurisdiction, Seattle's Office of Emergency Management (OEM), where I was director, received a \$1 million grant as "seed money," accompanied by the significant discretionary authority to manage the grant without interference from FEMA. Mayor Rice's departing Administration concurred but included the caveat to "make sure" the incoming Mayor (Paul Schell) would be supportive of that grant management arrangement—fortunately, he was.

Among Seattle Project Impact's initiatives:

- A successful residential retrofit training program for homeowners and contractors alike.
- Sophisticated urban landslide and seismic hazard map development by the United States Geological Survey.
- The launch of a school retrofit effort that identified 46 schools for structural strengthening against the ground motion.
- Promising early-stage development of a disaster-resistant business toolkit to assist businesses to plan to protect their employees, customers, and economic investment.

On February 28, 2001, at the Phinney Neighborhood Center, our public/private team planned to highlight these initiatives and celebrate the growing trust between individuals on our steering committee. Representing vastly different social, political, and professional perspectives, they had committed to common objectives: the resilience of our economy and the safety of our people. It was working!

The Nisqually Earthquake, at 10:54 AM, changed our plans for the day but validated our pride in what we had accomplished.

The Nisqually "story" has many features: as Seattle's emergency manager (then), I take pride in OEM's response. Our Emergency Operations Center functioned nonstop for days, dispensing information to local and national media, elected officials, and the public. Our recovery staff rapidly began damage assessment to facilitate the financial recovery of the community. Seattle OEM's neighborhood preparedness network reported that 92% of OEM's citizen neighborhood response teams immediately activated.

Project Impact stole the show, however. In one retrofitted school, a significant hazard posing a clear threat to the lives of approximately thirty 3rd grade children was removed. On the very day that serious injuries and even death were averted, it is ironic that the incoming federal Administration chose February 28 to announce that Project Impact would be eliminated due to "ineffectiveness."

Seattle Project Impact's alliance of activists, businesspersons, academicians, scientists, and, yes, government bureaucrats to pursue common objectives illustrated what is possible when we work together.

Americans, working together despite their differences— could we try that again sometime soon?

Note: 2001 was a challenging year: a few months after Nisqually, 9/11 happened. In September, I hope to provide some personal reflections on that day and its aftermath as well.



About Jim

Jim has spent 3 decades in emergency management, including 12 years at the local level as director of the City of Seattle's Office of Emergency Management and 8 and a half years as Washington State's Emergency Management Division Director. Jim retired from state service in March 2013. Jim also served as President of the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) from January 2011 to October 2012. He is currently sole proprietor of "EM Northwest Consulting" based in Seattle.

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