

# Disaster Recovery: A Window of Opportunity

Although no community wants to be faced with the daunting task of disaster recovery, the fact remains that many disasters are followed by the largest infusion of Federal, State, and local development capital that most communities will ever see at one time. Communities with up-to-date mitigation plans can clearly and quickly identify and articulate their needs to State and Federal officials. These communities will have a competitive edge when post-disaster funding and technical assistance become available. Communities that invest this capital thoughtfully can become safer and more disaster resistant, with stronger economies and a higher quality of life. Full recovery does not come easily, however, and effective leadership is necessary to create a more resilient, livable community in the wake of a natural disaster.



*In Arkadelphia, USDA Rural Development Administration funds were used to build attractive low-income, multi-family units.*



*In Arkadelphia, HUD funds were used in an innovative equity buy-down program to finance single-family home construction.*

Critical policy issues that emerge following disasters require local governments to make difficult decisions about how best to rebuild. Time is by far the most compelling factor in determining local recovery decisions and outcomes. Disaster victims have an inherent desire to rebuild rapidly and return to normal to the way things were before the disaster. Communities, however, must balance this need against the objective of building back better and stronger and use the opportunity of the disaster to improve their resistance to future disasters. Pressure to restore normalcy can be so strong that safety, hazard mitigation, and community improvement goals can be compromised or abandoned. Communities have, therefore, a very short period of time to introduce, and gain

## Steps for Successful Recovery Planning

- **Take advantage of the window of opportunity to develop an overall recovery strategy.** The outside funding and technical assistance that becomes available after a disaster can help your community make progress on its long-term goals.
- **Establish community goals and objectives.** Take the time and effort to unite the community behind agreed-upon goals and objectives.
- **Consider the planning process as well as the plan itself.** Structure the planning process so that it is open and participatory, but also quickly leads to agreement on a broad framework for recovery.
- **Employ multi-objective planning.** Look for opportunities to reap multiple benefits when incorporating hazard mitigation and sustainable redevelopment concepts into your recovery efforts.
- **Be flexible.** The recovery process evolves rapidly and flexibility is mandatory. Keep your options open and take advantage of unexpected opportunities.
- **All sources of funding are fair game.** Don't overlook non-disaster related grant programs. If expertise is not locally available, seek experienced grant writing assistance from other sources, such as regional or State agencies and the private sector.
- **Maximize community stakeholder involvement.** Recruit local corporations, foundations, and nonprofit or civic organizations to participate in the planning process.
- **Maximize the use of non-traditional partners.** Marshal local nonprofit groups and organizations to supplement Federal and State agency support.
- **Stay out of the weeds.** The recovery plan should be brief. Prioritize immediate, short-term, and long-term recovery actions; detailed design, architectural, and engineering plans can follow later.

acceptance of, new approaches to reconstruction. Throughout this section you will find some practical tools and resources that will enable your community to take advantage of this window of opportunity to become more disaster resistant and sustainable.

## Planning for Recovery

The initial period following a disaster can be chaotic. So many issues demand attention that any thoughts of long-term recovery planning are crowded out by immediate recovery efforts. Critical life and safety issues come first: search and rescue operations, treating the injured, re-establishing vital public services, and providing emergency shelter. But once the task of clearing debris is underway, community decision-makers need to shift their attention to long-term recovery. Ideally, planning for recovery occurred before the disaster. If not, now is the time to engage the community's attention to develop a recovery strategy.

The long-term goal of recovery planning is for your community to take advantage of the recovery and reconstruction opportunity to become more disaster resistant and, ultimately, more sustainable. Implementing hazard mitigation actions will help to make your community more disaster resistant. Whether it is called a Recovery Plan, a Strategy for Recovery, or an Action Plan, your community should create a concise plan outlining its framework for long-term recovery. How you structure community involvement in developing this recovery strategy depends upon the size of your community, the capabilities of local officials and staff to support a

planning initiative, and the amount of involvement your citizen review boards and associations have in setting community goals and policies.

Creating a recovery task force of community leaders, representatives of the local government, and interested citizens is a common approach for structuring long-term recovery planning. An existing community-wide task force can assume this responsibility or a task force can be created to focus exclusively on long-term recovery needs. Standing committees can be formed to address specific recovery issues such as housing, economic development, infrastructure, and hazard mitigation.

Another possible approach is a large open community conference or workshop format, broken into smaller task groups that report back to the entire group. While public hearings and meetings are useful for disseminating information and explaining the findings of smaller working groups, they are not useful for forging a recovery strategy. Far greater success can be achieved with small committees that reflect the wide range of community views and interests. Public meetings can then be held to review the findings of the smaller working groups and gain acceptance from the broader community.

If appropriate, larger communities can utilize capabilities already existing within their agencies and departments. A team of representatives from the planning, permitting, public works, and emergency management departments, among others, can be brought together to develop a strategy. A coordinator who has the necessary authority or clear access to the community's chief

executive should be designated. As always, public participation should be part of these efforts.

In some instances, local government capabilities are so severely strained following a disaster that it may be best to seek outside technical planning assistance to work closely with a small group of community leaders to develop a recovery plan. As part of its post-disaster mitigation assistance, over the past few years FEMA has provided technical assistance for long-term recovery planning to local communities facing significant rebuilding challenges. Information on how to request technical assistance from FEMA can be found in the Resources Section of this booklet.

In Arkadelphia, Arkansas, technical planning assistance was used successfully in 1997 after a tornado destroyed a large part of the downtown business district and surrounding residential areas. A FEMA-funded recovery planning team, including a planner, architect, economist, and engineer, worked daily with a local Disaster Recovery Committee to develop a set of reconstruction goals that contained specific implementation recommendations. These goals evolved into the city's recovery plan, which the City Council adopted within months. In addition to serving as the conceptual framework for the city's recovery efforts, the plan also attempted to remedy some of the community's long-standing planning and development issues.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*  
Margaret Mead

