Cornerstones to Resiliency

A moment of truth for all communities is how we respond during and after a disaster. Clearly that response is a key function of local government. During the disaster our focus is to preserve lives and property. After a disaster, our focus expands to resiliency. Our goal is to move the city to be a better, safer community than before the disaster. The challenges to accomplish this feat are significant. Cedar Rapids was guided by what we learned from others who faced those challenges.

The focus of this article is not limited to how to recover more rapidly after a disaster. Its recommendations also address what can be done before a disaster that will help your community recover if a disaster strikes your community. However, building resiliency has demonstrable benefits regardless of experiencing a disaster. Resilient communities are stronger, better and faster in growing jobs and the economy, controlling cost of government and improving quality of life.

Advice received from North Dakota, Oklahoma, Florida and Louisiana communities focused on the need to take time to develop long-term plans that focused on rebuilding with improved protection from future disasters and to engage the public in those plans. This article shares what we learned to support other communities.

Background

On June 13, 2008, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, (population 122,000) suffered what has been classified as this nation's fifth worst disaster in terms of damage to public property. According to national experts, most objective measures indicate that Cedar Rapids recovery has been nothing short of remarkable.

The flood inundated 5,390 residential properties, the entire downtown and all of the city's core service buildings including Central Fire, Police Headquarters, Public Works, Public Transit and City Hall. Despite this fact, all core city functions were operational within two days. The ability to restore these functions rapidly provided resources needed to drive recovery actions.

Prime examples of this included the city's ability to maintain basic utility services including water and wastewater treatment and to restore full capacity in less than ten weeks. This permitted major business and industry to continue operations and residents outside the flood impacted area to live relatively normal lives. Maintaining this capacity avoided the potential employment loss and relocation of thousands of workers. Maintaining these jobs and their families clearly facilitated economic recovery.

Recovery is not complete as flood-impacted residents and businesses continue toward rebounding financially and emotionally.   That's still some time away, but steps taken before and immediately after the disaster surely expedited the recovery period.

The cornerstones of Cedar Rapids recovery included vision, community engagement, relationships and systems management. Installation of these cornerstones was driven primarily by a change in government approved by voters in June 2005. That change brought the council-manager form of government to the community.

Initial steps taken by the new council and manager included creating a shared community vision, implementing community engagement processes and establishing a systems approach to government operations including strategic, financial and operational planning. These core professional management concepts were essential to Cedar Rapids resiliency.

Vision

The city's shared community vision provided the basis for a common framework to shape Cedar Rapids' future and guided recovery plans. Cedar Rapids City Council had completed a visioning process as was six months into "vision deployment" when the flood occurred.

The council incorporated a comprehensive vision document prepared by the city's Long-Term Planning Commission into a concise vision statement. Elected officials then deployed the vision based on a communication plan that included written materials, public presentations, discussions and most importantly – public engagement. The vision was also deployed to employees, business and civic groups, other governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The Cedar Rapids Vision focused on quality of life for future generations and incorporated sustainability values firmly within the community. It was compelling because it related how government should and would shape lives of current and future generations.

The success of this transition to a value-driven government is attributable to leadership from the city's elected officials. That gave the vision legitimacy and authority to guide the city in critical decisions after the flood.

This is a vital lesson learned from other disaster-impacted communities. Failure to have a shared vision with community buy-in causes delays in planning recovery efforts. The vision provides the "measuring stick" to evaluate alternate plans and ideas. There are no shortage of ideas and plans to assist in recovery. The greater challenge is how to quickly evaluate plans and ideas that will serve the community best in the long run.

Guided by this vision, as well as by previous strategic and financial plans, the mayor and council approved five disaster recovery goals just three days after floodwaters crested. The clarity of these goals' in addition to their direct connection to the Cedar Rapids' vision, served to provide essential community support to design and implement recovery plans.

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To be clear, by itself, the vision statement was not an important resiliency factor. What made the vision effective was that it was relevant, compelling and was championed by elected leaders. The efforts if the Council allowed the vision to be embraced by community stakeholders. Those stakeholders included neighborhood organizations, business and civic groups and other governmental and non- governmental organizations.

Engagement

The challenges of achieving meaningful public engagement in critical public decisions are matched only by their importance. Important policy initiatives won't be sustained over the long-term without vital public support. This challenge is complicated because time is a factor when measuring post-disaster resiliency.

For Cedar Rapids, plans to redevelop 10 square miles of flood-damaged residential and commercial properties depended on what, if any, improvements to flood protection should be made. The impacted area's size and magnitude of the flood (more than 11 feet above the prior record flood crest) made this extremely challenging.

Despite this challenge the city's flood management plan was approved within four months after the flood crest. The plan was developed with broad and intensive public participation and support. More than 2,500 people attended three public open houses and discussions. Overall community support has been sustained to this day.

The rapid pace of plan development combined with broad public engagement and support has made Cedar Rapids as a model for communities in the future. According to the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), this is the fastest a plan of this type has been prepared and with the highest level and quality of public engagement.

Keys to this result included city partnership with the Corps in a planning process that used public engagement in three distinct points in the planning process. Public feedback was used by technical staff and elected officials in decisions ultimately shaping the final plan. These public engagement events solicited comments for overall flood management goals and principles, options and criterion to evaluate those options and the final selected alternative.

City staff and elected officials designed the engagement events, referred to as "open houses", which translate highly technical data into readily understandable information relevant to community members. Specific and general feedback was gathered and posted on an Internet site both as originally reported and in summary format. A communication plan directed information plans preparing stakeholders for the events and reporting results. Public responses guided process improvements and indicated high support levels of the approach.

The open houses included sequenced stations containing concise information and graphics. The background information at each station supported key issues requiring community feedback such as flood protection options including potential costs and effectiveness. Staff, planning partners and elected officials were available to listen to concerns questions and support the need for feedback and explain how feedback would be used.

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Feedback was especially strong in favor of creating a "greenway" along some riverfront areas that would function as a spillway in the event of future flooding events. Likewise, feedback favored removable floodwalls in the downtown area to permit active integration of the riverfront in the downtown environment.

These critical decisions were controversial but prior visioning and planning work provided the framework needed to demonstrate that the city's identity was defined by its relationship to the river. As the City's flood management plan took shape it was driven by community feedback that the City needed to utilize this resource to re-position the City rather than wall off neighborhoods from the river.

A more enhanced public engagement process developed the neighborhood redevelopment plans with several important enhancements. Due to increased complexity of this phase of planning, trained city staff facilitators were used to assist workshop participants in preparing plans for separate neighborhood areas. A council appointed Neighborhood Planning Process (NPP) committee guided this process. The NPP focused on assuring the highest quality public engagement and communications.

Over one hundred city staff invested in an intensive two-day facilitation-training program. The staff engagement with the public in a facilitative role was extremely well received by the public. This unique opportunity to experience city staff outside of their traditional roles in a community building activity was invaluable.

Neighborhood redevelopment design efforts followed immediately after a flood protection plan was approved. Participation and interest levels remained high despite concerns about "engagement burnout." More than 6,000 volunteer hours contributed to the Neighborhood Plan, which was adopted by the council within seven months of project start.

In less than one year, Cedar Rapids had prepared plans to guide the recovery of ten distinct residential and commercial neighborhoods covering more than 10 square miles.

Contrary to initial concerns, the public engagement process expedited the planning process while adding high quality content and community support. Essential to this result was the attention paid to process design and implementation.

Properly designed, the public engagement process will build public trust. Listening and incorporating public feedback on ideas, options and evaluation criterion in the process is critical to building trust and developing a better outcome. People saw that their ideas, concerns and words were incorporated into the planning process. They saw that what they said made a difference.

Relationships

The three critical functions enhanced by strong community relationships include: resource management, planning and public engagement.

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Partnerships are critical to plan and achieve recovery and reinvestment goals. Developing and nurturing partnership relationships so that they operate at optimal levels will provide for a more resilient community and improve overall operational effectiveness and efficiency.

While the Cedar Rapids disaster unfolded, key leaders from the city, human service agencies, businesses, neighborhood associations, faith based organizations and other government and non-government organizations agreed to meet regularly to identify and solve problems, collaborate planning and resource management. Named as the Recovery and Reinvestment Coordinating Team (RRCT), this team began operations within a week of the flood.

Getting the limited resources to the right people on a timely basis is a major challenge. Competition for those limited resources can create added stress and divert attention from other critical recovery functions. One of the key tasks for RRCT was to inform and engage stakeholder groups about resource availability and to recommend how best to prioritize limited resources. Knowing that key stakeholders would be involved with these recommendations reduced the conflict regarding these decisions. Additionally, it provided the benefit for identifying existing and future needs for planning purposes.

One example of the advantage of this relationship was the development of plans for the use of Community Development Block Grant Funds. Because of the existing relationship within the RRCT, the elected city elected officials were able to quickly prioritize needs and communicate those needs to state officials for inclusion in the state plan forwarded to federal officials.

Planning was similarly coordinated and supported by the RRCT. Regular RRCT meetings identified a list of system issues to address in planning efforts. One example was the need for workforce housing. Lack of specific types of replacement workforce housing could hamper long-term recovery of major industries. Knowing this, the city was better able to prioritize efforts and resources needed to begin housing development efforts. Other top issues included business recovery, interim housing, delivery of human services, transportation and restoration of cultural assets.

One of the barriers to public engagement, especially after a disaster, is getting people to show up. There are ample opportunities for diverted attention. Using the relationships established within RRCT each stakeholder group could tailor communications to best reach their members.

Relationships are built on trust. Trust is built over a period of time. That is why it is better for these relationships to be developed before a disaster occurs. The added benefit is that even if a disaster never occurs, these relationships can facilitate a more effective community team focused getting the best results quicker and more efficiently.

Systems

The very definition of disasters incorporates the fact that systems are impacted. Recovering damaged systems requires a deliberate and disciplined approach. In other words, disaster recovery rarely occurs with a "seat of the pants" tactics. There is too much complexity to disaster and therefore to disaster recovery.

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Installing all the systems needed for disaster recovery is not an ideal circumstance. Fortunately, most communities have basic operating systems that can be used or adapted to meet recovery needs. Key systems required for disaster recovery include:

Strategic planning systems provide a disciplined approach to identify priorities, to manage resources and identify the steps and milestones to achieve goals. It clearly communicates expectations and resource deployment issues. Strategic planning systems were used by the city days after the flood to identify goals, prepare detailed strategic plans and performance measures.

Financial planning systems provide a long-term framework for financial decisions. This is especially critical after a disaster when the rush of adrenaline could prompt financial decisions that are not sustainable over the long term. A financial plan provides the framework to understand disaster prompted changes to the city's operating and capital needs and revenues as part of an informed decision making system. The city's ten-year financial plan was modified to reflect the anticipated financial resources within 90 days after the flood.

Project management (PM) systems provide the structure to manage multiple complex projects simultaneously in the most efficient manner possible. PM can be used for both construction and operating projects. Post flood Cedar Rapids identified over 200 capital projects in excess of $1.5 billion. Effective use of project management was responsible for the city's ability to restore wastewater treatment within 74 days instead of initial projections of six-to-twelve months.

Disaster related assistance delivery systems are required to deliver program funding to residents and businesses. While handing out money can appear to be an easy task, federal and state requirements hold cities accountable that funds are properly used. Failure to demonstrate strict rules results in financial liability to the city. Adding to this complexity is that interpretation of the funding requirements (especially "duplication of benefits" rules) is often in flux even after funds are made available to cities. Cities have the opportunity to operate these systems with added pressure that funding recipients are often close to despair because of the length of time required for funding to reach them and confused by the lack of clarity regarding funding restrictions.

State "Jump-Start" funds designed to assist flood-impacted homeowners with home repair or replacement were disbursed using a case-management system. The system enabled rapid distribution and the case management approach permitted data to be gathered that later was used to identify program gaps and quantify needs.

Customer service feedback systems essential to keep customer focused systems on track. For those traumatized by a disaster, attention to the details required to assist in recovery is of high importance. The feedback is used to make adjustments to assistance delivery systems quickly. Priority is placed on both understanding and exceeding customer expectations. Feedback systems included customer service surveys, focus groups and oversight committees. Early feedback revealed the need to have a means to track application process and timelines

Program evaluation systems provide the basis for determining the effectiveness of disaster recovery initiatives. Based on the experience in other communities new and different programs are designed and deployed after each disaster. Determining which of those programs best fit the needs of various communities requires program evaluation.

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Process improvement systems guide changes to the service delivery systems and programs. These services and programs are frequently designed within days after notice of funding availability and must be adjusted to eliminate waste and improve results.

Courage

To be truly resilient after a disaster requires courage–courage to take action addressing immediate needs while at the same time planning and building a greater community less prone to damage from future disasters.

There is always strong pressure to return to life as it was before the disaster occurred. But it would be wrong and counterproductive to pretend that could happen.

Life after a disaster will be different. For many, especially those directly impacted, it will never be better. The challenge is to acknowledge this fact, work to help as many as possible to get back on their feet and then begin the process to build for the future.

Any community that experiences a disaster is changed, both physically and emotionally. That change must be respected and built upon. But that can be difficult.

One consistent comment from disaster-impacted communities is the need to plan for a better future. Those communities that failed to do so typically expressed regret at the loss of opportunity and the negative consequences of that failure. Richard Florida, author of The Great Reset, makes an effective case for the need of communities to reposition themselves to meet the demographics of future populations, particularly aging baby boomers and "next-geners". Disasters present those opportunities but "resets" are politically challenging. Retaining and attracting future generations of workers to cities will be crucial to the economic success of cities.

Courage is also required to not over-promise that recovery will be either quick or easy. Recovery is complex, challenging and takes time. It is tempting to promise that those whose lives were turned upside down will be able to quickly return life as it was before a disaster but that is rarely possible. At the same time there is a need to find "quick start" projects that can proceed. These projects can include facilities that clearly need to be rebuilt immediately. In Cedar Rapids quick start projects included over $100 million of public facilities including the wastewater treatment plant, police station and housing.

This is the time to remember that the currency of government is public trust. Maintaining that trust in times of crisis is essential. Promising quick and easy solutions will erode that trust and confidence.

Finally courage will be required to avoid looking for others to blame when problems arise. Recovery never works the way we want. Other agencies, individuals and organizations are unlikely to perform perfectly. But blaming others for problems is not the solution. Working together to find solutions and supporting each other will help deliver better results over the long run.

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Summary

The experience of Cedar Rapids underscores the basics of being resilient complement to principles behind professional management. Having a clear, shared community vision; effective and practiced public participation process; robust community and regional relationships and strong system focus will sustain recovery efforts and support a community resiliency. The need for these elements to be in place before a disaster reinforces dedication to professional management basics.

The bottom line is that disaster recovery is long and difficult. Being prepared is the best course to take to improve your community's ability to recover effectively. The good news is that preparation will yield positive results even if a disaster never occurs. That's because resiliency is about leadership, good management, sustainability and the courage to act in the community's best interests.

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