01 PLANNING FOR POST-DISASTER RECOVERY BRIEFING PAPERS

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN RECOVERY PLANNING

A community's identity is tied up in the quality of its physical characteristics, from distinct neighborhoods, teaming business centers, and historic resources to special features like rivers, lakes, greenways, and mountains. When a disaster strikes, it erases those unique features. Unrecognizable, the community identity feels lost.

Disasters create many problems and a great deal of uncertainty. Although thinking through the process of a community conversation about recovery choices is overwhelming, it is also vital to restoring the built environment. And it's more critical to heal the emotional wounds that remain in the wake of a disaster. Public engagement after a catastrophe builds hope, trust, and confidence in government, relationships, new leaders, and opportunities to improve long-standing community challenges. To capture these benefits, public engagement must be both deliberate and strategic.

KEY POINT #1

Design the public engagement process with the end in mind.

KEY POINT #2

Select tactics that invite a broad range of stakeholders to participate—what's the approach?

KEY POINT #3

Framing and reframing—what are our shared interests?

KEY POINT #4

You've been heard and here are the results—what's the status of implementation?

APA
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Making Great Communities Happen

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KEYPOINT #1:
Design the public engagement process with the end in mind.

To position a recovery plan to effectively gather public input, the problem or need facing the community must be clearly stated. Planning and engagement after a disaster can get lost in the complexity of challenges. This risks dedicating staff time and money to a process that has no clear purpose or end. To overcome this potential problem, it's important to answer the following questions:

- Clearly define problem or need—Why are we here and what problem do we need to solve?
- Create a system that engages stakeholders—What information do we need from the public to answer questions about how to solve the problem?
- Begin the process of community healing—What does the public need to fully focus on this problem and answer this question?

Cedar Rapids, Iowa. On June 13, 2008, the city of Cedar Rapids experienced catastrophic flooding. The 600-foot-wide Cedar River grew to span two miles and covered 1,400 city blocks. Damages totaled $7 billion, and 18,000 residents were displaced. It ranked as the nation's fifth worst disaster.

The city engaged the public immediately following that flood crest. Within days, elected officials directed staff to engage residents in a conversation to build a vision to prevent future flooding and to frame that conversation around the principle of building a more resilient community. Mayor Kay Halloran proclaimed, "We will become a better and stronger" Cedar Rapids.

More than 2,500 residents and business owners, city staff, technical experts, and state and federal officials contributed to the design of a flood protection plan within five months. By November 12, 2008, the city council approved the River Corridor Development Plan (City of Cedar Rapids 2008). The plan outlines 7.5 miles of flood walls and levees to protect the city. The community also designated almost 230 acres of green space that gives the river more room to flow and swell. The plan served as the framework for eligibility of recovery services for housing and business assistance. It also defined the area and qualifying criteria for a comprehensive voluntary acquisition program. Moreover, it provided a master plan for utility and roadway improvements.

With the alignment of flood protection established, community members evaluated next how to create redevelopment strategies for the damaged neighborhoods. Under the leadership of elected officials and with guidance of a citizen steering committee, the Neighborhood Planning Process (NPP) kicked off in January 2009. Again, the community focused on building back stronger . . . more resilient. "Building a greater community for our kids' kids" became the tag line for the NPP. In addition to developing a framework for recovery, the engagement process provided the community the opportunity to start the process of healing. In each of the eight meetings, people were invited to share their stories of loss and pain. To fully engage the public in a dialogue about its future, each meeting started with time for those interested to reflect on what they had lost to the flood. Once acknowledged and honored, citizens were open to discussing building a vision for recovery of the 10 affected neighborhoods.

In eight meetings, over four months and over 6,000 hours of public participation, the community generated a reinvestment strategy for 1,400 city blocks. More than 166 actions items defined the vision document along with a timetable for implementation. The city council approved the plans in May 2009 (City of Cedar Rapids 2009).

Citizens involved in the planning process assumed new roles such as leading neighborhood revitalization, nonprofit housing rehabilitation, and new housing development. The planning framework provided a basis for local disaster recovery decision making and implementation. The structure, clarity, and broad public support delineated a clear start and finish line for local state and federal officials. The city's population has grown since the disaster. Housing and business recovery has been robust. The city is building the flood protection system and has secured over half of the $400 million needed.

Today, Cedar Rapids is stronger and building back better. Through the process, the city and its citizens were able to create trust, identify issues of concern, and identify solutions in ways that the kept the process focused on the outcomes.

KEYPOINT #2:

Select tactics that invite a broad range of stakeholders to participate—what's the approach?

Although there are many ways to communicate with the public, engaging the people is different. Public engagement is really about listening. Survivors are distressed, depressed, and crushed by the loss and the complexity of issues that require their attention. In addition, disasters indiscriminately damage property and livelihoods regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or education. Listening shows another person that her input has value. When we actively listen, the care and consideration demonstrated in the process builds trust. Typical engagement tools include surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings, open houses, and social media like Facebook and tweeting as well as large public meetings. Yet, after a disaster, the conversation of recovery requires special care. The community needs to heal along with defining the details of housing, business, and infrastructure recovery. Community leaders should expect to absorb the public's pain when gathering feedback.

Galveston, Texas. Hurricane Ike damaged more than 75 percent of the structures in Galveston, Texas, on September 13, 2008. Community leaders took quick and bold steps to build a process to engage community members that reached all citizens. In late November 2008, leaders began the process of appointing 330 citizens to the Galveston Community Recovery Committee (GCRC) and charged them with the responsibilities of creating vision, goals, and projects that restore livable community characteristics.

The city council directed staff to design a public engagement process that focused on "listening to a diversity of voices(City of Galveston 2009), adding: "Listening is often more difficult than talking . . . it (requires) extraordinary openness and a willingness to entertain diverse ideas. . . . (It) must allow multiple visions to coexist, listening for the right source of action that transcends and unifies all our individual visions." (Senge 1990) As a first step, the GCRG set up a Communications Committee. They established a communication framework that included methods to distribute and gather input. It included electronic, print, and broadcast media tools.

The public engagement process included 10 open houses and six workshops. In the open houses, held over two weeks in January 2009, more than 800 attendees provided 2,700 comments in face-to-face discussions, surveys, comments cards, and sticky notes. The public gave more input by e-mail and through the city's website. Based on the information gathered in the open houses, the community outlined five areas of focus (i.e., environment, economic development, housing and the character of the community, health and education, transportation and infrastructure, and disaster planning) that framed the next phase of the recovery conversation.

Six subsequent workshops led by the GCRC members outlined the specific issues, vision, goals, recovery projects, and plan. Public attendance at the meetings ranged from 175 to 225, and the committee spent 4,200 hours developing the recovery plan. After only seven months, in March 2009, Galveston completed the design of a plan for recovery that reflected the community's interest. The plan outlined actions and projects that would allow the community to recover. It also outlined the "road map" for funding and resources need to accomplish the actions (City of Galveston 2009)

KEYPOINT #3:

Framing and reframing—what are our shared interests?

Take responsibility to frame and reframe issues, questions, and options so that the community discussion deals with interests, not positions. Framing is an integral part of conveying and processing data on a daily basis. Successful framing techniques can be used to reduce the ambiguity of intangible topics by contextualizing the information in such a way that recipients can connect to what they already know. To help create a shared understanding, we must demonstrate transparency, help build a long-term vision, and take the opportunity to educate the public.

Grand Forks, North Dakota. During the winter of 1996–97, blizzards dropped more than 100 inches of snow on North Dakota's Red River Valley. The subsequent spring thaw led to record flooding in late April 1997 along the Red River, devastating the downtowns of Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, and damaging 83 percent of homes in these communities. Despite widespread damage and severe economic disruption, Grand Forks acted quickly to repair infrastructure and restore services, thanks, in part, to the focus provided by a short-term recovery plan.

In the aftermath of the flood, Grand Forks' mayor and city council charged the heads of the city's urban development, public works, and finance departments with developing priorities for recovery, submitting options for approval, and collectively framing the use of the city's recovery resources. In the first month following the flood, the mayor and these "Tri-Chairs for Recovery" worked together with city staff, elected officials, and local community and business leaders to refine and frame a vision for recovery focusing on reducing future flood risks and promoting downtown economic development.

By early June the mayor and tri-chairs, working with federal officials, had formulated a strategic plan for using Community Development Block Grant funds and submitted an application for hazard mitigation grant funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for voluntary buyouts. During these first two months the mayor and tri-chairs, along with the leaders of East Grand Forks, were also working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on options for permanent flood controls. By late June, city leaders, working with a technical assistance team from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, had drafted a set of policies and programs in the form of a Recovery Action Plan for the period of June–November 1997.

The plan presented a set of specific tasks linked to four broad objectives based on the shared interests of the community: (1) voluntary acquisition and relocation of the most heavily damaged housing, (2) provision of both interim and long-term housing and community development, (3) business redevelopment and downtown revitalization infrastructure rehabilitation, and (4) long-term mitigation of the flood hazard along the Red River.

By 2008, the city's population had surpassed exceeded pre-flood levels and today the city's flood protection system is in place.

KEYPOINT #4:

You've been heard and here are the results—what's the status of implementation?

The purpose of public engagement is to aid the community in short- and long-term decision making. Preparing a clear implementation strategy, based on the public's interests with a clear vision and involving the maximum number of stakeholders, builds community problem-solving capacity and commitment.

Greensburg, Kansas. On May 4, 2007, a massive tornado destroyed or severely damaged 95 percent of Greensburg, Kansas. Since then, city and community leaders have been committed to rebuilding the town as a model sustainable community. In the face of the alternatives to abandon or rebuild, community members began the dialogue about the town's recovery.

While federal agencies supplied food and temporary housing units, community members started to hold weekly meetings in a tent. In an interview with USA TODAY Green Living Magazine, Mayor Bob Dixson explained that rebuilding Greensburg as a "model green community" took seed in the very first tent meeting. Although the early stages of the community discussion involved " . . . a lot of hard work . . . " with both positive and difficult conversations, citizens grew to support rebuilding in a more sustainable way. FEMA and a Kansas City-based design firm developed a recovery plan that provided the framework for a greener community. Less than a year after the disaster, elected officials began the process of implementing a plan requiring LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) platinum standards for buildings larger than 4,000 square feet (Quinn 2003).

Today, the Greensburg recovery is a model and characterized repeatedly by observers as "forward-thinking." The community vision included detailed implementation policies and actions. As a result of their

efforts, the community has been building and restoring public and private buildings to meet their new standards. For example, the LEED Platinum 5.4.7 Arts Center takes its name from the date of the tornado that devastated Greensburg. The 1,670-square-foot building is a center for community arts and provides classes, exhibits, and performances. Built to LEED Platinum standards, the 4,700-square-foot City Hall building is the symbol of Greensburg's vitality and leadership in becoming a model sustainable community where social, environmental, and economic concerns are held in balance. It houses the city's administrative offices and council chambers, and serves as a gathering space for town meetings and municipal court sessions (NREL 2012).

CONCLUSION

Public engagement populates the details of recovery plans. Policy makers can use these plans to focus on service delivery and problem solving to address recovery needs, rather than being tied up in emotionally charged discussions regarding what needs to be done. Community leaders have the opportunity to become listeners, conveners, and curious learners. However, to do this well, public agencies need to be open, thoughtful, deliberate, and humble as they design the process.

Public engagement delivers transparent decisions. This allows community members to both share their ideas and have a clear understanding of what's happening, why, and when. The by-product is trust and confidence in the government. Public engagement forges a deep and renewed commitment to the community's recovery mission as it develops new capacities and implements the details of public interests.

Four components shape an effective public engagement system:

1. Design a system with the end in mind.
2. Next, select tactics that invite a broad range of stakeholders to participate.
3. Frame and reframe issues, questions, and options in a way that the community discussion deals with interests, not positions.
4. Finally, the public needs to understand how its input will inform the decision-making process and how the ongoing implementation results will be communicated. It is the public official's role and responsibility to create a structure for the conversation. As Peter Senge (1990) says, "You're committed when you are not only enrolled but feel fully responsible for making the vision happen."

RESOURCES

www.cedar-rapids.org
www.cityofgalveston.org
www.grandforksgov.com
www.greensburgks.org
www.greensburggreentown.org

City of Cedar Rapids, Framework Plan for Reinvestment and Revitalizations, December 2008, available at www.cedar-rapids.org/government/departments/community-development.

City of Cedar Rapids, Neighborhood Planning Process, September 2009, available at www.cedar-rapids.org/government/departments/community-development/floodrecoveryplanning.

Galveston Long-Term Community Recovery Plan, available at www.cityofgalveston.org/DocumentCenter/View/192.

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