

# **Quick Response Report #89 COMMUNITY DISASTER RECOVERY: IT IS NOT GETTING EASIER**

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# **COMMUNITY DISASTER RECOVERY: IT IS NOT GETTING EASIER**

Recently, I made a field trip to Scranton, Pennsylvania (July 24-25) to look into the city's recovery from the major flooding that occurred throughout the state in mid-January 1996. The trip was initiated by a staff member at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute, who wanted a current and realistic case study of a community that was having trouble recovering from a recent flood disaster. I combined that work with a quick response grant in order to review this case study in the context of early case studies and cross case analyses.

In this report I will first provide a brief, factual account of the recovery process in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and then offer some observations, comments, and opinions about the difficulties of the recovery process. Given the short period of time spent on-site, there may be errors of fact and of perception. The author welcomes corrections and comments from readers.

## **CASE STUDY OF FLOOD RECOVERY: SCRANTON, PA (1996)**

### **Local Background Information**

The city of Scranton (population 82,000), located in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, is a typical older, northeastern city with aging infrastructure and a gradually declining population. The city and the county are actively trying to build up the local economic base, which has changed significantly since its heyday in the 1930s, when coal and railroads were major employers. Currently, the economy has a diverse mix of employers, with no major dominant one. Some of the efforts to revitalize the downtown area are obvious and attractive - such as

improved streets; a large, new retail mall; and Steamtown National Historic Site, which features the old railroads.

Nevertheless, some of the infrastructure and housing stock are relatively old. For example, almost 75% of the housing stock was built before 1939. Among the older and most flood-prone residential structures are those in the Nay Aug neighborhood. That low-to-moderate income neighborhood, which was badly impacted by the January floods, will be a focal point for this case example of recovery. The case is framed from the perspective of the local level.

The city's economic health is such that it is considered a financially depressed community by state law. Under this status, state regulations control the amount of local expenditures in an effort to prevent local public insolvency. The city council was required to enact a financial recovery plan and make certain cutbacks to keep the city solvent. There are limits on payouts for capital improvements, and there are controls on use of city funds and also on Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. In short, because of the city's financial problems, the city has less latitude to use its own funds, as well as those from the CDBG (which is limited to use in low- and moderate-income areas) for flood-related projects.

As would be expected in a community with financial problems, local efforts at job generation are significant, and stimulating the economic base is a primary focus of local public and civic leaders. As is often true in other cities, strong economic pressures can come into conflict with environmental protection and disaster reduction measures.

Scranton, along with many other Pennsylvania cities, has a long, troubled history of flooding from the many rivers in the state. In fact, Pennsylvania has 45,000 miles of waterways, the most of any state in the U.S. [*Scranton Times*, March 15]. In January, 1996, a rare combination of weather and other factors led to flooding and ice jams throughout the state. Severe winter weather had generated snowfalls roughly 40 inches above normal, and roughly four or five days of below freezing temperatures had kept much of that snow on the ground. The floods caused 14 deaths and more than \$1 billion in property damage in the river basin area. The estimated damage to publicly owned property

(roads, bridges, and buildings) in the state was estimated at between \$400 and \$500 million [*Philadelphia Enquirer*, April 22]. The flooding in Scranton occurred on January 19, 1996; it was estimated to be somewhere between the 33-year and 100-year floods that have occurred in the region.

Immediately after the flood, Governor Ridge (Republican) aggressively pressed the Clinton Administration for maximum federal aid. The Presidential disaster declaration, which eventually did include all of the counties in the state, opened up the possibility of more federal programs for the impacted areas. Over a period of several weeks, FEMA extended declaration #1093 to cover all 67 counties in Pennsylvania, including thousands of municipalities. This meant all of the counties were eligible for low interest loans and other federal assistance tied to a disaster declaration. FEMA amended the original declaration several times so that all of the counties were eligible for public assistance and hazard mitigation grants. (In addition to this January declaration, by the end of July 1996, FEMA granted two additional declarations for flooding in some of the Pennsylvania counties.)

The subsequent response and recovery efforts at the state level were affected by some recent changes in state agencies. The governor abolished the Department of Community Affairs, an agency that in the past had aided disaster impacted communities with recovery and mitigation planning and implementation. The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA), was responsible for all 67 counties in the state and thousands of municipalities. PEMA had to come up with staff, augmented with contractors, to provide hazard mitigation assistance as well as other guidance and assistance to the large number of municipalities eligible to apply for federal disaster assistance.

## **Local Pre-Flood Conditions**

According to local officials and long-time citizens, the Lackawanna River appears to be causing floods in Scranton both more frequently and with more impact over the years. Among the reasons given are: a) lack of dredging (it is estimated that the riverbed may have risen as much as

10 feet in recent decades); b) increased development and paving in other communities located up-river in the county; and c) inadequate attention to storm drains and storm runoff systems for both existing and new development.

Prior to the floods, city, county and State agency officials had several exchanges on the topic of storm water run off. The State Department of Environmental Protection had reviewed the storm water runoff ordinances enacted at local level (county and city), but said it could not enforce them. Yet, it was known that the municipalities were not enforcing the existing ordinances; this was usually because to do so would add cost to development projects and discourage new business. In the past, the city and county have placed great reliance on structural mitigation measures. At the present time, however, both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and FEMA have made it clear to disaster-impacted communities that they are not likely to take on long-term, expensive, structural mitigation measures.

## **The Impact of the January 1996 Floods**

### **Early Damage Estimates**

Early estimates by the mayor of Scranton put the damages to public property at \$8-10 million. Early estimates of damage throughout the state by the governor were about \$700 million, with the state expected to incur about \$100 million of costs connected with recovery [*Scranton Times*, January 29]. In Scranton, the flood damage to the residential sector was significant. It was estimated that 1350 homes were damaged.

### **The Nay Aug Neighborhood**

Of special interest to this case study are the problems that the citizens and local officials are having in the neighborhood that floods more frequently and more severely than any other in the city - the Nay Aug area. Roughly 46 homes are situated in the floodplain, or in some cases in the floodway, of the Lackawanna River. Most of those homes are older structures (50 to 100 years old), in the modest price range (\$40,000-60,000); some of the residents have experienced as many as four floods. The residents and the assistant city planner of Scranton worked to make this neighborhood a candidate for buyouts and

relocation, and to make the neighborhood's needs a priority locally. A vocal and effective neighborhood leader and a committed city planner have received a lot of publicity in the local newspaper in their efforts to take mitigative measures and reduce the flood hazard for these vulnerable citizens.

By way of background, there are a number of income and personal characteristics of the victims in the Nay Aug neighborhood that made recovery even more difficult: a large number of relatively low-income residents, including large numbers of elderly and handicapped victims of the flood. These characteristics raise questions about the victims' mobility, ability and interest in moving. Even if buyouts were possible, many homeowners would receive only the market value for their homes, and their ability to buy replacement housing would be quite limited.

### **Sequence of Events Regarding Recovery Planning**

As is typical after a declared disaster, federal and state officials work to provide explanations of the various types of programs and assistance available to local officials and citizens after a disaster. In the case of the public officials, the use of Sec. 404 funding for mitigation projects, and the use of Sec. 409 for preparing mitigation plans, are key elements of the recovery and mitigation efforts.

At the local level, the sequence of steps that were taken by citizens and local officials are outlined below.

#### **Initial Steps**

According to local newspaper accounts, local thinking focused on major buyout and relocation efforts very quickly after the flood. In late January and early February the city prepared a plan for major relocation. The focus was on a federal buyout.

By way of background, FEMA and PEMA prepared a State/Federal Hazard Mitigation Strategy, required as a condition of the Presidential declaration; in this case the strategy was drafted but not published. This document provides at least the broad outlines of a strategy and is the basis for deciding on a dollar amount to be allocated to mitigation.

According to the deputy federal coordinating officer for this declared disaster, the strategy document was used by both state and federal mitigation officials as a general work plan; it did not contain city-specific information.

The city of Scranton's first step was to request \$90 million for buyouts, when the mayor forwarded to state officials pre-application for funding through the federal Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) to acquire and demolish an estimated 1,000 structures in the Plot Section, Park Place, and Lower Green Ridge [*Scranton Times*, February 18]. Participation was to be voluntary.

The city also submitted an application for a second, \$20 million program, to build "accessory rooms," which are rooms located above the base flood elevation for people who chose to remain in homes in the flood plain. It was explained that the strategy was to accommodate both those who wanted to move and those who did not [*Scranton Times*, February 18]. It is not known whether this technique has been used elsewhere in the state and with what success.

In mid-February, local frustration was growing over long-promised structural flood control projects, to be paid for primarily by the USACE. Since some of the Nay Aug residents had experienced as many as four floods, they too were frustrated by lack of flood controls or likely relocation options. Headlines in local papers included: "Flood Residents Fed up with Promises" [*Scranton Tribune*, February 13]; and "Nay Aug Ave. Residents Want Out" [*Scranton Times*, February 13th]. In late February, FEMA officials agreed to pay for most of the temporary flood control work along the Lackawanna River in order to head off spring floods.

Negative indications about the likelihood of wholesale buyouts were given to the city by FEMA federal coordinating officer, Jack Schuback, in early March. The local paper quoted him as saying that "Wholesale buyouts in Scranton's flood-prone neighborhoods are less likely than snow in July." FEMA had allocated a total of \$20 million for buyouts in the entire state; yet in Scranton a request was made for \$110 million [*Scranton Times*, March 5].

An editorial in the local paper on March 7th was critical of both local

and state actions. The writer noted that "U.S. can't buy out all flood victims," and went on to note that "victims' disappointment was only natural and that unreasonably high expectation played a part." It commented that "the Connors administration alone asked FEMA for \$110 million in flood relief money after cavalierly making promises, in some cases, that it knew it could not keep. Moreover, it is likely that local governments would be able to meet required local shares for emergency relief if FEMA's contributions were significantly higher." The editorial went on to criticize the state government, about which it said, "Governor Tom Ridge, who has criticized Clinton and FEMA and championed the Republican drive for 'states' rights,' should consider a long-term state program for floodplain buyouts. The objective is to lessen the damage of future flooding, a goal in which the state obviously has a heavy stake." The final comment was, "And while he's at it, the governor should instruct the Dept. of Environmental Protection to reverse course on a change in its permit process that will make possible further development of wetlands that play a significant role in flood control [*Scranton Times*, March 7].

A few months later, the city's request for a buyout of flooded residential properties received preliminary rejection by the state, via PEMA [*Scranton Tribune*, May 2]. The state agency noted that feds will not even consider projects with cost-benefit ratios of less than one. Nay Aug/Electric streets area rated between .17 and .38; Albright Avenue came in at .84. City planner Quinn indicated a plan to refile the application. [Details of how these cost-benefit ratios were calculated and by whom are not known at this time.]

Five months into the process, it appears that the local officials were not clear on what PEMA and FEMA would consider, regarding acceptable cost/benefit ratios and upper limits on financial requests. The city prepared and filed a series of applications and they were rejected, with months of waiting in between actions.

## **The Second Step**

As a next step, local officials began compiling a priority list of flood-damaged property in the city, One list was for 40 properties with a \$2.5



million buyout cost. Another approach dealt with 15 houses; the cost was not stated. These were the most dangerous of the flood-prone properties in the city [*Scranton Tribune*, March 13].

Mayor Jim Connors sought another possible source of help to control the Lackawanna River, when he asked the National Guard to help in flood control work [*Scranton Times*, March 22]. Previously, he had requested assistance from USACE and been turned down.

Subsequently, FEMA turned down \$1 million requested for Lindy and Keyser Creek and Meadowbrook flood projects; the state hazard mitigation officer indicated that the money (\$750,00 federal and the rest local) possibly could be used by the city for buyouts [*Scranton Times*, March 30].

On May 2, the *Scranton Times* noted that PEMA refused flood buyouts: "PEMA has rejected the buyout funding, although the city has another chance to resubmit its application for buyout funding. Cost-benefit numbers did not work out, according to PEMA. Final decision is to be made in July." [See the postscript, for additional decisions made in August.]

### **The Third Step**

As a fallback position, the city continued to press for money for acquisition of 16 properties on the east bank of the Lackawanna River that are believed to be in "harm's way." These properties are in the 1700 and 1800 blocks of Nay Aug Avenue. "A study of the 16 properties will indicated these properties are continually falling below the flood elevation level, which obviously indicated that additional floods will produce additional FEMA expenditure, and . . . loss of life" [*Scranton Times*, May 2].

PEMA was reconsidering flood buyouts for 42 homes that the city says are repeatedly flooded. Officials at both the local and federal levels were concerned that the only NFIP/FIRM maps were done in 1980; everyone agrees on the need for updated hydrologic maps. [The status of the request to FEMA was unknown as of late July 1996.]

From interviews with local officials and with victims in the Nay Aug area, it was clear that they did not think that the FEMA staff provided

adequate information about available programs, in terms of current availability and/or consistency. The citizens were especially angry about the fact that Disaster Assistance Program information sheets handed out were not accurate. The Hazard Mitigation Program apparently was used in a very limited way by FEMA and was not available to most, according to the local citizen activist leader in Nay Aug. Further, the citizens were critical of the people answering the FEMA "Help Line," because they did not give full or consistent information.

## **Use of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Funds**

"The city expects to receive about \$4.4 million from CDBG, which combined with \$236,000 in other income will amount to a total of \$4.7 million. "Requests for funding under the CDBG program . . . total over \$6 million [*Scranton Times*, March 18].

"Requests for funding from a federal grant program are nearly double the amount of money the city will have on hand this year after it deducts outstanding obligations and its own operational expenses" [*Scranton Times*, March 18].

As was noted earlier, Scranton has certain constraints in how it uses CDBG funds, given its financial status. The issue for all local governments using HMGP funds is how to come up with the 25% match requirement.

## **Postscript**

In mid-August, PEMA informed city officials that the agency would approve buyouts for 18 residential units at high flood risk and that it would approve a storm water runoff project on East Mountain Road. This meant that the city's buyout requests had made the first cut of approvals by the state, but that FEMA approval still had to be sought by the state for its choices. Additional details about the basis for the approval of the buyouts and the source of the funding are not known at this time.

According to the FEMA deputy federal coordinating office for

mitigation, the state reviewed all of the buyout requests from all of the municipalities in the state and then made decisions. Since the state received requests for funds that reached 10 times the actual amount available, decision making was difficult. PEMA has made acquisition of vulnerable property a priority and will spend about \$16 million of the approximately \$20 million available for buyouts.

## **Interviewer's Observations**

### **City/County Problems**

- The region has a history of poor city/county relations, generally [Source: local newspapers, July 1995].
- Existing mitigation efforts, such as building code regulations, and assessing and handling storm water runoff, also suffer from lack of intergovernmental cooperation and lack of enforcement of existing regulations.
- Little, if any, systematic coordination has occurred among city/county/state agencies regarding existing mitigation measures. The single most important mitigative step that is partially in place, but not enforced, are city and county measures to control storm water runoff. The lack of drainage infrastructure for existing development and the reluctance to enforce storm runoff controls for new development (aggressively encouraged for job generation) are adding to the potential for even greater flooding impacts in the future. The State Department of Environmental Services and the county each say the municipalities must manage the enforcement.
- The city has never included any flood mitigation projects in its proposed uses for CDBG funds in the twenty-four years that it has received those funds.
- There was problematic interaction among local, PEMA, and FEMA staff about what was feasible and financially possible regarding buyouts and relocation projects.

### **State-Level Problems**

- Scranton officials seem to have difficulties in dealing with both PEMA and FEMA officials. There were several encounters that led each

to view the other as uncooperative.

- If the State had in place a Sec. 409 plan (the required plan for future mitigation) that was current, specific, and well-focused on the states's long-term flood needs, that would be the basis for expeditious and effective mitigation planning.

### **Federal Problems/FEMA**

- FEMA and PEMA prepared a Mitigation Strategy document, but it was not made public. Hence, it was never seen by local officials, contractors, and others involved in the recovery efforts.
- The FEMA Region III mitigation office hired the firm of Woodward and Clyde to review HMGP applications. Contractor staff commented (at the National Floodplain Managers Meeting in June) that a large number of applications were not complete or prepared properly.
- Citizens complained regarding lack of follow up. After receiving a list of programs provided (not necessarily current and accurate, it turned out), no one provided follow up information or help.
- An unfortunate outcome was citizen distrust of disaster officials at every level. The citizens did not have confidence in the Red Cross either. They said they are making ad hoc arrangements for future evacuation and sheltering needs.
- Other problems included too little flood insurance (NFIP) coverage, too few policies in effect in flood-prone areas. Additionally, more explanation of the program, its benefits and extent of coverage for basement flooding was needed - for local public officials, for citizens, and for property owners, lenders, insurance agents.

## **OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE RECOVERY PROCESS**

After the flooding of January 19, 1996, the flood waters receded rather quickly, but the city of Scranton will be struggling with flood mitigation and recovery for years. The city is having an inordinately hard time

recovering from the floods that occurred on January 19, 1996. There are a variety of reasons for the difficulties, most prominent of which is the failure of each level of government to cooperate and coordinate with the others in devising and implementing a recovery plan. Experience has shown that the recovery process at the local level cannot come together unless all agencies at each level of government pull together - and that has not been happening.

In Scranton, problems occurred at the city, county, sub-state regional, state, and federal levels in providing assistance to the victims of the flood. The problems were due in part to the fact that all 67 counties in the state were included in the Presidential declaration, and the number of municipalities affected numbered in the thousands. The federal and state emergency management agencies, as well as the Red Cross, apparently could not provide assistance in an effective and equitable manner to all of those municipalities affected. The city of Scranton, which has a declining population and economic problems, appears to be having an especially hard time recovering.

Many of the problems that Scranton is experiencing were due to certain conditions and circumstances that existed before the 1996 flood. These include its economic and financial concerns, and poor city/county government relationships. Additional problems were caused by changes at the state level, including the governor's recent dissolution of the Department of Community Affairs, an agency that in the past had helped cities cope with disaster recovery. In my view, it is surprising that in a state with such a frequent history of damaging floods, the state and local agencies do not seem to think about floods in a comprehensive or long-term way. The organization and planning structure for planning and investing in mitigative measures aimed at correcting hazards and reducing risks do not appear to be effective, at each level of government. Recovery from disaster has always been a difficult process for disaster-impacted communities, and it does not appear to be getting any easier. Researchers and public practitioners have known for some time that strategic planning for mitigation and recovery is desirable. In fact, the federal Interagency Hazard Mitigation Team requirement is intended to contribute to such strategic planning. Ideally, strategic planning would

mean a long-term comprehensive planning effort that encompasses a vision of how the community should look (i.e., redevelopment of community systems and structures that includes some community betterment projects - not just a replication of what existed before), and a strategy for assembling the means to implement the plan.

The PA Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) and FEMA did not come up with a Hazard Mitigation Strategy (the successor to the Hazard Mitigation Plan) promptly after the disaster event. No Hazard Mitigation Strategy paper was made public, although a working draft exists, as far as I know. Hence, there was no strategic framework for thinking about mitigation. Concomitantly, no clear-cut information about total federal funding was made available in the early months, so that the state and the municipalities could in fact put together a reasonable recovery plan. The difficulties that Scranton officials encountered are predictable for the most part, and not significantly different from troubled recoveries observed for many years. Unfortunately, poor recoveries remain all too common [see Popkin and Rubin (1991), "Disaster Recovery After Hurricane Hugo in South Carolina," Natural Hazards Working Paper #69, Boulder, Colorado: Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado; and Rubin et al., 1991].

Recovery problems at the community level have been described and analyzed during the past two decades by numerous researchers, including this author. Some successes have been documented (for example, Mittler, 1996, not yet published), but they are all too few. Getting back to understanding the Scranton difficulties, earlier research results on disaster recovery can be used as a basis for analyzing what conditions and factors do or do not contribute to a prompt and effective recovery in Scranton. The recovery research done by Rubin et al (1985, 1991) provides a set of key factors or determinants of an efficient recovery.

## **Key Elements of the Recovery Process**

### **A. Personal Leadership**

- 1 local decision making
- 2 priority of intergovernmental relations
- 3 redevelopment of damaged areas
- 4 long-range view of the rebuilt community
- 5 ability to marshal internal and external resources

### **B. Ability to Act**

- 1 availability of state and federal resources
- 2 reliance on local rather than external resources
- 3 local administrative and technical capacity
- 4 horizontal and vertical intergovernmental relations

### **C. Knowing What to Do**

- 1 knowledge of requirements for state, federal assistance
- 2 identification of sources of assistance
- 3 realistic, flexible, and current preparedness plans

*Source: C.B.Rubin, ICMA Green Book (1991).*

The Scranton case study outlines the various problems that the city has experienced in planning its recovery for the first six months after the flood disaster. Many of those difficulties could have been predicted, based on the factors outlined above. Nevertheless, some levels of government (county, state, and federal) provided less assistance and less information than is normally expected, and collectively they have not (yet) provided the extra help Scranton needs to overcome its problems.

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*Disaster Recovery From Hurricane Hugo*. Special Publication # 69. Boulder, Colorado: Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado. 1991.

### **Other sources**

News clips from *Scranton Times* and the *Tribune* newspapers.

Information from the local disaster field office regarding declaration details.

Interviews with:

- Chief and Assistant City Planners, City of Scranton
- Four citizens impacted by flood in Nay Aug neighborhood, including Mr. Chuck Richter, neighborhood leader

### **Background information from**

FEMA disaster field office, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Viki Doty, Chief of Hazard Mitigation, FEMA Region III

Chamber of Commerce

Local newspapers: *Scranton Times* and *Tribune*

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