

Beyond Rebuilding

We Need to Secure the Jersey Shore



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On Oct. 29, 2012, the last thing on anyone's mind was May 24, 2013. But in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy that date loomed large as the unofficial hard deadline—Memorial Day weekend—by which time much of the New Jersey Shore had to be rebuilt, or significant tourism dollars would be lost.

That date is only one of several factors that have kept the Sandy-recovery effort largely on a path of quick return to the status-quo. In the middle of the scramble to get residents back in their homes, businesses back in operation and tourists back on the boardwalks, could New Jersey have done more to focus on planning for the next storm? And if so, is it too late to start now?

The pull to the short-term came from many directions. The Memorial Day deadline, on which rested up to \$30 bil-

lion in Shore tourism revenue, was just one of a host of considerations that made short-term action seem like the only right thing to do. Among other considerations were:

- **Pressure from displaced residents** Before the end of November 2012, FEMA had logged requests for assistance from more than 230,000 displaced New Jersey residents. While not all requests were deemed eligible, when more than 2.5 percent of a state's population lacks housing, it's a crisis. Returning as many people as possible, as quickly as possible, to their communities and their jobs was paramount.
- **Overwhelmed local governments** Municipalities were suddenly inundated with hundreds or thousands of rebuilding requests, and needed to process them quickly, while also focusing on restoring public infrastructure and assets.



This photo, taken during an Army search and rescue mission on October 30, shows damage from Hurricane Sandy to the New Jersey coast.

• **No requirement to look forward** The FEMA Base Flood Elevation data, while delayed briefly, provide a seemingly safe benchmark to which to build. These data, on which many rebuilding decisions and flood insurance premiums are based, are short-term in nature, intended to address regulatory and permitting needs. They examine only what would happen if another storm similar to Superstorm Sandy should hit, without including consideration of the significant projected sea-level rise that most climate science researchers predict. Rebuilding plans are not currently required to consider projected sea-level rise.

A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE VULNERABILITY OF THE HUMAN, NATURAL AND BUILT RESOURCES ACROSS THE FULL RANGE OF POSSIBLE HAZARDS, AND A CONSIDERED PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES, SHOULD BE ON EVERY MUNICIPALITY'S TO-DO LIST.

• **Incentives focused on a quick recovery** Almost all rebuilding grants awarded or announced so far are directed at hastening the return to normal. Very little federal grant money has been set aside to evaluate future vulnerabilities and encourage discussion about changes that will need to take place in the longer term.

• **Lack of dialog about longer-term planning** It is difficult to talk about change and future hazards in the middle of a clean-up effort. However, given the billions of dollars being spent to rebuild, it is incumbent upon our leadership to plan and


spend scarce public resources wisely. While media outlets, citizens' groups and advocacy organizations have tried to sustain a dialog about the need for consideration of longer term strategies and trade-offs, there has been little matching official effort to do the same.

The signal is clear: Let's just get this place up and running again.


However, if that's all we accomplish, we leave ourselves unnecessarily

vulnerable to the effects of another storm as severe as Sandy or worse. Now is the time to focus on the long term with:


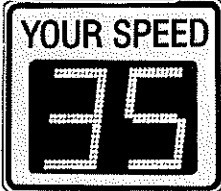
• **More, and dedicated, planning resources for local governments** The need to address long-term concerns comes in the middle of the biggest crisis many affected municipalities have faced in a long time. Towns need additional federal and state resources to manage the recovery



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process and engage their communities more effectively in longer-term planning efforts, so that they won't face a similar crisis the next time.

- **More robust hazard mitigation planning** These plans, required for the state, counties and municipalities to be eligible for FEMA pre- and post-disaster funding, should be more than just an emergency response plan. New Jersey Future is among the organizations recommending that funds in the upcoming round of federal disaster-relief grants be set aside for more thorough hazard mitigation planning. This would mean that planners as well as emergency managers would be involved, that the best available forward-looking scientific data would be employed, and that each municipality would have its own detailed chapter in its county's plan. The result would be a plan to increase resilience against future hazards, not just a template for responding to them.

- **Public input** More public outreach and dialog, especially around how the state spends rebuilding funds is needed. Recommendations have been made that the next round of federal grant funding include a requirement for more explicit and extensive public comment and engagement. While private funding continues to help media organizations engage in this, it doesn't carry the same weight as it would if it were an official priority.

- **Alignment with a clear statewide strategic vision** A vote scheduled for last December on adoption of the draft state Strategic Plan was postponed so guidelines for resiliency to future weather disasters could be added. Those guidelines are still being developed, and there is not yet an approved statewide development plan that would help communities align areas for growth and areas for preservation with long-term hazard mitigation planning. Having that statewide guidance would help to match individual municipalities' efforts with a set of statewide goals, and help ensure efficient and effective deployment of state resources.

- **Long-term metrics** Instead of measuring the degree of restoration, we



Many were displaced from damaged homes, like the one pictured above. Before the end of November 2012, FEMA had logged requests for assistance from more than 230,000 displaced New Jersey residents.

should be measuring long-term change: Are more people out of harm's way? Is the transportation system better able to rebound from severe weather? Are there more areas of the coastline where natural systems can serve as barriers against storm surges? How much of our urban water infrastructure has been repaired and updated so that it can handle a future severe weather event?

Not all municipalities in the state were seriously affected by Superstorm Sandy, but every community can prepare itself better for potential future disasters by applying the approaches described above. A comprehensive assessment of the vulnerability of the human, natural and built resources across the full range of possible hazards, and a considered public discussion of alternatives, should be on every municipality's to-do list.

However, sufficient resources will be needed to assist municipalities in undertaking this effort and in implementing identified mitigation strategies over time. The Planning Grant program recently offered through the state's Department of Community Affairs is a good start, but far more

funds will be needed to enable every New Jersey community to engage in the process. And to be truly effective, planning for resiliency cannot be an isolated exercise. Rather, it is essential that this function be fully integrated with a municipality's master plan, zoning and land use regulation and capital improvement program.

The funds we'll need to plan effectively may be considerable, but that amount is undeniably insignificant compared to the monumental costs we'll incur if we don't.

New Jersey Future and Sustainable Jersey have collaborated to create a recovery and resiliency network to respond to municipalities' need for long-term planning capacity. The network, staffed by a team of recovery planning managers and resiliency coordinators, will provide long-term, direct assistance to municipal staffs in Sandy-affected communities as they develop and implement recovery plans. The network mirrors FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework, which strongly recommends the appointment of local-level program coordinators to help manage and advance recovery efforts. ▲