

Sheltering for catastrophes: A call for change

Rick Tobin

Every emergency manager in the United States had a painful wake up call while watching the debacle of mass care and shelter during Hurricane Katrina. The problems went far beyond the public massacre at the Super Dome. There was simply chaos for weeks in Shreveport, Houston, Little Rock, Dallas and San Antonio, just to name a few target communities for mass relocations. Much of this could have been avoided if agencies and organizations had not laughed at emergency managers, like me, who have called for permanent regional evacuation centers since the late 1980s. I won't have space in this piece to describe the derision, laughter, and censure I encountered throughout the 1990s, and up until Katrina, by every level of government and by many non-profit organizations. Some of the letters I've kept from them are political mine fields.

In September 2005 I wrote a widely disseminated paper titled, "Ten Emergency Management Paradigm Changes to Improve National Disaster Response." I stated boldly that:

"Since 1989 . . . I have always stressed the great vulnerability of the coastal cities in the US, and proposed early on the absolute need for development of a pilot relocation center to manage the needs for at least 30,000 evacuees. Once this multi-use facility was proven useful and viable, a total of 12 would be built around the United States.

I also proposed in the early 1990's that the military base closures offered unique opportunities for citing these shelters. It was clear after a very bad experience in Sacramento County, California that local leaders will be more interested in developing housing on closed bases in order to increase the tax base than for creating evacuation sheltering, no matter what the military agreements say about using the abandoned sites for the best purposes for the interest of the public. Developers and elected officials hungry for reelection at any cost will block the use of military bases for these sheltering purposes. It will take a federal mandate to ensure these relocation facilities are built at closed military bases . . . "

Let me be emphatic that I have never supported the use of the vacant federal prisons located throughout the United States to house disaster relocation victims. *Those sites are prisons.* People will not want to be housed there. The business model I designed described the building and operation of multi-purpose facilities that had true regional value for many of the public's government serves, but that the sites would be fully engaged in long-term housing when metropolitan areas were devastated. The building technologies were also to be green in nature, and monolithic in construction, so they could withstand almost any natural hazard and, when needed, be completely

recycled back to other productive uses instead of going to landfills.

Again, many of my colleagues and detractors derided the idea that a metropolitan area in the United States would ever be destroyed by a natural disaster or human caused event (outside of a direct nuclear strike). In 1996 my paper, "If You Knew," was published in the *Journal of American Society of Professional Emergency Planners*. In what may be considered a prophetic warning from twelve years ago, I stated:

"Most US planners turn a deaf ear to any discussions about the complete and permanent loss of a metropolitan area. However, a powerful shock wave roared through the California planning community after the Oakland Hills Fire, the LA Riots, and the Loma Prieta and Northridge earthquakes. Kobe was a warning. US cities are at risk! And, if catastrophic losses overcome and bankrupt insurance firms, the process of rebuilding a livable urban infrastructure may be lost. It is the author's premise that in the next 10 years, it is likely that the US will experience the permanent loss of a major metropolitan center due to catastrophe."

I have beaten on doors, pleaded my case, and bared my chest to cheap shots and criticism from the deaf and blind bureaucrats that are always ready with too little, too late. The Landark Project I developed in the 1980's needs to be reconsidered and supported by Congress and the next President. We have very little time to make these centers ready. My estimate is that with the threat base increasing, and with at least 80 percent of our population living in cities within 100 miles of coastlines, that there may be as little as five years before our next loss of a great metropolis.

Dare we once again ignore the overwhelming financial and human costs of the mass relocation from Katrina? Are we lost in our deep morass of historical dementia wherein we have forgotten all we once were and our greatness of spirit? My challenge to the emergency management community is to join in the voice of reason and find a way to awaken the sleeping leaders who do not understand that threats must be addressed for generations and not just during a single holding of office. The clock is ticking. Mother Nature is a ruthless time keeper.

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