RESTORE THE COMMUNITY

THE PLANNER'S APPROACH TO DISASTER RECOVERY

CREATE

"Ask yourself, 'what's the right thing to do for my community, who will be impacted?' And now how do we get there."

---Vince Nicoletti, Deputy Director Planning and Development Services, San Diego County

Each planning department needs to determine the best course of action when faced with recovering from the severe crisis wrought by disaster. City of Thousand Oaks City Manager Drew Powers recommends a proactive approach. Some of their responses were particularly effective.

- Prepare packets with permits, zoning requirements, existing entitlements, and site plans in advance of homeowner request and if possible have this in place digitally for emailing to property owners as mail may not reach after the disaster
- Assign each affected site to individual planners to focus the process and aid in communication and coordination
- Establish a temporary, separate contract office just to handle recovery permits
- Anticipate needs and craft ordinances in advance that can be approved before or immediately after to address key areas concerning FEMA funding, temporary occupancy permits, and on-site storage
- Decide how to handle re-build permits in advance

Vince Nicoletti encourages planning directors to remember that any program is scalable and should be flexible enough to meet the needs of the community in which you work.

TRAIN

"Sharing capabilities before and during emergencies strengthens communities and aids recovery."

---Erin Morris, Code Enforcement + Planning Manager, City of Napa

Particularly hard-hit by wildfire events over the last 15 years, San Diego County developed an innovative, flexible approach to training that would occur before the event.

- Conduct regular half- and full-day sessions featuring tabletop exercises with real-time scenarios with which to experiment
- Use role-playing and interactive tools for planners, volunteers, and other staff to problem-solve how specific issues like ordinance development, permits, and staffing might be addressed during and after the incident
- Test scenarios with other jurisdictions to ascertain flaws or unanticipated situations
- Prepare a list of contacts with volunteer organizations and members of the business community to coordinate ideas and efforts on factors like debris removal, inspections, and other concerns specific to your community
- Fold in stress management training like debrief meetings to assist staff when the pressure is on to safeguard their health so they can continue to support the community
- Incorporate awareness in local residential and business communities that helps neighborhoods form support networks that distribute accurate information about resources and processes for recovery

COMMUNICATE

"The planning department can become a one-stop shop for recovery."

---Andrew Powers, City Manager, City of Thousand Oaks

In times of stress, communication is essential and when people have lost their homes, communication becomes complicated. Leveraging every possible platform helps spread information in a local, dynamic way. A variety of venues offered great forums for communicating.

- Town hall meetings advertised on the radio, through social media, and with fliers at relief centers, churches, and the post office
- Local radio talk shows
- Facebook and other social networking sites with a page dedicated to the event
- Visits to affected sites to see if the property owner is there

Chris Stephens, Director of Resource Management Agency for Ventura County, noted that the large number of town hall-style meetings the County held with affected property owners went a long way toward making the recovery process smoother. Clear, consistent information conveyed by the City and the County alleviated potential confusion where overlap existed, for example with how fire debris removal would be handled.

Experience attests to the importance of testing communication protocols in advance as system failures (like text alerts) can and do fail. Have a back up plan in place if technology goes down that is multifaceted. Finally, do not underestimate the value of staff in the field to locate and communicate with affected property owners.

COLLABORATE

"You can't make friends during an emergency."

---Jeff Lambert, Community Development Director, City of Ventura

For Erin Morris, Napa's Code Enforcement and Planning Division Manager, collaboration is key to response and recovery efforts. When she was with the City of Santa Rosa, she led an inter-departmental team to develop the City's Hazard Mitigation Plan and found that emergency planning efforts finalized just months before the Tubbs fire in 2017 helped grow relationships that were priceless when that disaster hit.

- Build an organization chart before the event with names and contact information for inter-agency and departmental staff and volunteers and keep it updated
- Invite stakeholders across the jurisdiction along with members of disaster response volunteer groups to participate in regular training with the planning department as a way to network and exchange ideas, including architects, builders, contractors, and engineers
- Organize regular training sessions on a range of specific topics related to disaster preparation and response to develop relationships outside the planning division
- Reach out to communities with experience handling similar disasters to discover their best practices and lessons learned

Whatever direction makes sense for your community, adapting to intradepartmental and inter-jurisdictional collaboration to your department's needs will increase capacities over going it alone.

Disaster recovery efforts require extreme measures and commitment to the development of healthy, organized responses to chaotic situations. Every region has unique needs. Active, localized preparation establishes systems that otherwise might be absent when disaster hits. If a jurisdiction is not in sync with current regulation, it may miss opportunities for federal or state assistance and other forms of funding to reimburse recovery expenses. Inadequate preparation can be more costly than the investment in training and other forms of pre-planning.

The approaches described here can be customized to meet the recovery efforts of each jurisdiction and region. Scaling the best practices effective in adjacent cities or counties so they meet regionally specific needs makes it possible to adapt the recovery approach to fit the geography, history, budget, and requirements of any community.

Perhaps one of the biggest take-aways from repeated disasters across the state is that continual engagement prior to the event makes for better preparation, better response, and ultimately more successful recovery efforts. Everyone knows it's not a matter of "if" disaster will strike, but "when." Use the time between events to train, coordinate, plan, and build and maintain relationships that will keep your community vital.

Rincon Consultants provides support services to assist planning department in their preparation and recovery efforts.

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THE PLANNER'S APPROACH TO DISASTER RECOVERY
PREPARED BY RINCON CONSULTANTS, INC.

When disaster strikes, every pre-planning effort makes a difference in a region's ability to recover quickly. Across the state, planning managers find that the work of developing the planning document is valuable beyond the report itself. Erin Morris, Code Enforcement and Planning Division Manager for the City of Napa, notes that "working together creates communication channels, shared understanding, respect, and common purpose that is instrumental during a crisis." Behind the scenes and in the aftermath of these crises, planning staff must nimbly confront unanticipated challenges, often beyond the scope of existing staffing levels, long-range plans, and ordinances. To support restoration of a healthy, vibrant community in the wake of the pain of natural disaster, Rincon Consultants has gathered some lessons learned based on the experience of planning directors, public works managers, and others directly involved in the process of restoring the community after a major natural disaster. These practical suggestions can be scaled or adapted depending on the needs, concerns, and attributes of your community.