Disaster Recovery in Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Seizing the Opportunity to Build a Greater Community

Christine Butterfield¹

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Cedar Rapids, Iowa experienced record flooding on June 13, 2008. The Cedar River, which runs through the community’s heart, swelled far beyond its 600 foot banks to span more than 2 miles wide. The disaster ravaged 10 square miles of the City and displaced 18,000 residents. Flood waters destroyed thousands of homes, over 1,200 businesses, and 310 local, state and federal offices serving the region. Some estimates place the total community loss at $7 billion.

In the days immediately following the flood, the community focused on life safety measures, including evacuations, rescues and the stabilization of infrastructure and utilities. In spite of the magnitude of the devastation, no lives were lost. As flood waters receded, city leaders met within days of the disaster and set a clear course for community recovery and proclaimed that ‘Cedar Rapids will become stronger after this flood and more resilient.’

Cedar Rapids commitment to become more resilient led officials to approach community recovery in new and unique ways. The community’s recovery policies attracted national attention and was recognized by FEMA, the American Planning Association, who awarded the City its 2011 Planning Excellence Award and Best Practices in Hazard Mitigation and Disaster Planning, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who gave the city its Outstanding Planning Achievement Award, and the 2009 International Downtown Association recognized the City through its Pinnacle Award.

Disaster Recovery Decisions: Building Greater Urban Resilience

In disaster recovery, the term “resilience” is repeatedly tossed out as the target. We all want to rebound and bounce back quickly from challenging events. But what does that mean, how do you do it, who does it and how do you know if you’ve succeeded? Recovery from natural disasters in the United States is complex, involving many layers of government and even more layers of rules and regulations. In addition to the crisis itself, a multitude of problems arise including subsequent disasters cascading from the event and navigating a highly bureaucratic system of recovery services. This, coupled with the public’s emotional distress, leaves survivors, community leaders, politicians and administrators overwhelmed. The complexity sometimes paralyzes those facing the uncertainty of recovery. This leaves many hopeless and unable to

¹Senior Management Advisor, Management Partners, 2107 N. First Street, Suite 470, San Jose, CA 95131
cbutterfield@managementpartners.com

define a clear direction to rebound. However, Cedar Rapids officials made a number of decisions that allowed the city to rebound and recover quickly.

First, City Rapid’s elected and appointed officials accepted that it was their responsibility to rebuild the city. They owned disaster recovery and results. It was clear that federal and state agencies provided access to money for housing recovery and potentially business recovery through Community Development Block Grant funds, Hazard Mitigation Grant funds for property acquisition, and FEMA assistance to help private property owners and public facilities rebuilding move forward. However, federal and state agencies repeatedly reminded the community that those resources were not intended to make survivors ‘whole’. CDBG, HMGP and FEMA assistance provide initial assistance to put people on the path to recovery. In addition, leaders knew that state and federal assistance met only a narrow portion of the $7 billion in community losses. The City needed more money to recover.

Second, the City Council directed staff to develop a vision for recovery and outlined, within five days of the disaster, the priorities for rebuilding. The creation of a flood protection system topped the list, followed by housing, business, finally restoration of public facilities. Elected official said the plan needed to provide a framework for recovery. With broad public support, the plan would also be used as a vehicle to communicate the community’s commitment to build a greater, more resilient city to attract more funding to meet the long list of gaps in financing. The plans and demonstrated implementation of it gave state and federal officials’ confidence in the community’s ability to recover. This confidence meant the city received support for a number of unique solutions that address Cedar Rapids need to recover, such as business assistance funded with CDBG, a comprehensive acquisition strategy and federal support for flood protection at a record pace.

Third, as the disaster changed the people and landscape of Cedar Rapids, public services needed to adapt to reflect new community needs. Immediately, staff began the process of transforming operations and developed systems, processes and programs for temporary housing, rehabilitation, interim mortgage and down payment assistance, immediate business assistance, financial counselling, mental health, and public health education services. The city transformed into a health and human service organization within days of the disaster. Third party administrators became an extension of staff along with new internal project management systems that enhanced staff capacity to deliver results.

Relationship building and the commitment to solve problems served as the final elements of community leaders approach to recover and become more resilient. There was nothing to be gained by blaming any agency or individual for the flood in Cedar Rapids or the daunting, murky and frightening tasks of recovery. Local elected and appointed officials agreed that rather than blaming others for the recovery problems, the focus must be problem solving.

Model for Urban Disaster Resilience

With the contributions of more than 2,500 residents and business owners, city staff, technical
experts and state and federal officials, the community designed a plan for flood protection within 5 months. By November 12, 2008, the City Council approved the River Corridor Development Plan. 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. Today, the City has acquired over 1,200 properties for construction of flood protection, floodway and infrastructure improvements.

With the alignment of flood protection established, community members evaluated next how to create redevelopment strategies for the damaged neighborhoods. Again, the community focused on building back stronger...more resilient. Building a greater community for our kids’ kids - became the tag line for the Neighborhood Planning Process (NPP).

Under the leadership of elected officials and with guidance of a citizen steering committee, the Neighborhood Planning Process kicked off in January 2009. In eight meetings, over 4 months and over 6,000 hours of public participation, the community generated a reinvestment structure for the 10 affected neighborhoods. Over 166 actions items defined the vision document along with a time table for implementation. The City Council approved the plans May, 2009.

The City's strategy to invite extensive public engagement and the speedy pace of plan creation produced numerous positive outcomes. The rapid planning process shaved 3 1/2 years off the Army Corps of Engineers project timeline. By November 2010, the Civil Works Review Board endorsed flood protection on the east side of the Cedar River for consideration of federal authorization and funding. Most likely, this will happen through congressional vote of support for a new Water Resources Development Act. Staffs, elected officials and community members use both plans to guide short and long term lobbying efforts. The plans also provide leverage for public policy decisions.

The recovery vision plus demonstrated results delivered through disciplined implementation helped build confidence in the community’s capacity to actualize the plans. As a result, governing units continue to collaborate with Cedar Rapids in developing new strategies to support recovery efforts. Some examples of this include, in August 2012, the State of Iowa secured federal support for redevelopment of historic properties in the 100 year flood plain. However, the commitment to flood protection through 1,200 voluntary property acquisitions, construction of a section of flood protection complete along the river near one of the historic areas and ACOE support near another section, plus the broad public support of the plan inspired state officials to work with the federal government to make a change.


Another example is the Growth Reinvestment Initiative 4 adopted by the State of Iowa in December 2013. City officials, proposed that the state allow the municipality to collect and retain the growth in sales tax, following the establishment of a base year or starting date, and apply the additional money to construction of the flood protection system. Typically, cities in Iowa can secure voter support of up to 1% in sales tax for local use over a five year period. This new strategy puts close to $300 million in the hands of the community to fund the flood protection system.

The flood recovery vision served to guide financial decisions over the immediate and long term. The City administered more than $350 million in federal assistance over a five year period for housing assistance, business assistance, approved production of 1,100 new housing units, demolition of 1,000 damage structures and property acquisition programs.

Conclusions

The City designed systems that provided for transparent, sustainable and speedy public engagement strategies, developed innovative, award winning local, state and national public policies, and bold and sustainable disaster recovery systems that positioned the community to move forward and reinvent damaged neighbourhoods while permanently moving more than 1,300 residential properties out of harm’s way.

Public endorsement of the plans allowed policy makers to focus on service delivery and problem solving to address recovery needs and projects rather than being tied up in emotional charged discussions regarding what needed to be done. Cedar Rapids agreed on the "what" of recovery. The plans provide the community the ability to focus and lean in to the "how."

The planning framework provided a basis for local disaster recovery decision making. The structure, clarity and broad public support delineated a clear start and finish line for local state and federal officials. It is a model for other urban disasters.

Results since the disaster include state and federal monetary support of flood risk reduction strategy valued at $400 million, a 4% gain in population, the creation of 230 acres of new floodway, construction 1,400 new dwelling units, attracting $545 million in new development investment in the community, and assisting with the restoration of 85% of flood impacted businesses which exceeds the national average of 25%.

The Cedar Rapids flood recovery also provides lessons to other urban areas regarding resilience. The community recovered quickly because it took responsibility for its own recovery and acted quickly, designed a shared vision that provided a framework for decision making, quickly adapted its mission and services to meet the new community needs, faced the challenges of the recovery through problem solving and grew new and better relationships that continue to serve the community beyond the demands of the disaster.

4 City of Cedar Rapids, IA, City Council Legislative Priorities <http://www.cedar-rapids.org/city-council/legislativepriorities/GRI/Pages/default.aspx>