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Every Community Can Explore Its Potential for Resilience

Recently a visitor to our website, a newly appointed planning commissioner, asked what resiliency planning means. That's a current buzz word that a few years ago referred mostly to a community's potential to recover from economic blows, but now has become newly popular as a way to talk about planning how to adapt to climate change.

Our first instinct was to say that all good comprehensive planning--and neighborhood planning--contains an element of planning for the unexpected, including natural disasters, man-made

tragedies, economic dislocations, and conflicts and wars.

But it's true that communities often have an inkling of whether they have a higher than average likelihood of facing a major earthquake, crippling plant closure, collapse of a critical bridge, civil unrest, damaging storm surge or hurricane, or nuclear power plant meltdown or threat thereof. So it makes sense to focus on those particular possibilities.

The planning process that zeroes in on several of the most probable scenarios would be called resiliency planning.

Fundamentals should include:
1. Soliciting expert opinion about which risks are most likely to occur
2. Assigning weights to types of threats depending on the likely severity of the impact of a particular event
3. Calculating order-of-magnitude cost estimates of recovery under various scenarios
4. Involving the public in determining what aspects of resiliency they believe pose the greatest risks to their way of life
5. Learning what, if anything, can be done to mitigate each type of resiliency challenge
6. Identifying the informational, technical assistance, and financial resources that are most likely to be available to assist with recovery from each challenge
7. Giving extra emphasis to types of disasters that a community might have a realistic chance of preventing if it takes concerted action (perhaps plant closure, bridge collapse, and civil unrest in our example)
8. Then engaging in an ordinary community planning process to determine what should be done now to make recovery easier

Our examples really play up the point that resiliency might involve a physical, economic, or social issue. While disaster management planning has occurred at some level of sophistication in most cities, many of the exercises and role plays focus on the immediate hours after a disaster, and really do not address what happens when the community is still recovering in six months, a year, or five years. The need for emergency medical evacuation drills will long be over, but that does not mean everything will be back to normal.

Focusing on the aftermath period is where resiliency planning efforts can really shine. Planning commissioners and activists can help to make sure that such considerations become a part of their community's comprehensive plan.

Unfortunately in the U.S. right now, federal disaster relief occurs almost altogether post-event. Funding is not available for undertaking expensive pre-disaster measures that would prevent greater loss of life and property. So municipalities need to plan how to fend for themselves.

At the neighborhood scale, leaders can concentrate on what might happen if all or a large part of the neighborhood is disrupted by something unexpected. Some types of events are much more likely than others in your neighborhood. For instance, you might be next to a railroad track that moves hazardous freight, or you might be almost completely dependent on one employer.

So get busy and get going on resiliency planning. For more, see our new web page and the links to more detailed information and ideas found there.

Next Month: Classy Ways to Dress Up Your Community

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