

Recovery of Government Facilities and Services –

The Problem Is...

Facilities owned by local governments may be damaged in a disaster. When this occurs, the normal response and recovery actions of the government are hampered. The types of damage may include buildings, equipment, building contents, and financial records.

When this occurs, the city or county will find its overworked staff dealing with the recovery of its own facilities and services at the same time as it is dealing with the recovery of the community as a whole.

Because of the obvious problems associated with such disruptions, cities and counties have focused on the earthquake retrofit of city halls and administration facilities, as well as fire and police stations. While these facilities are critical during emergency response, other facilities are key during long-term recovery. These additional facilities also need to be evaluated.

Finally, local governments need to pay special attention to services located in historic structures. The repair of these facilities may be delayed significantly by historic building regulations.



The City of Bay St. Louis in southern Mississippi ended up purchasing another building to use as a city hall due to delays in its efforts to repair flooding damage to the historic city hall in Hurricane Katrina.

What Can Be Done?

Cities and counties can take four simple steps – NOW – before any disaster – to ensure that their facilities and services recover more smoothly in future disasters. These steps are in addition to the recommended steps related to financing recovery discussed in a separate issue paper (*Financing Disaster Recovery*).

(1) The structural integrity of key government facilities in earthquakes should be evaluated, as should their location relative to areas subject to flooding, landslides, and wildfires. In addition, the vulnerability of building contents, particularly files, computer equipment, and other key equipment should be evaluated. The list of facilities subject to this review should include not only city halls, county administration buildings, and police and fire facilities, but also public health and social services buildings, senior and community centers, and financial centers.



Damage to San Francisco City Hall in 1906

(2) Local governments should have plans and back-up procedures to enable them to pay employees, social service recipients, and vendors if normal finance department operations are disrupted.

(3) Plans should be made for the emergency relocation of government facilities critical in emergency response, as well as any government facilities with known structural deficiencies or in hazardous areas.

(4) Plans for prioritizing rebuilding of government facilities are needed. This decision-making process will largely be based on the degree to which the facility is considered “critical” and the extent of damage suffered by the facility. However, the recovery process also provides an opportunity to evaluate the existing location of facilities that house government services. That evaluation should occur during the repair and rebuilding process, and may also need to occur during the evaluation process described in (1) above.

MORE INFO –

Evaluate and Mitigate Potential Damage to Key Government Facilities

An essential first step in recovery is also a key part of mitigation: an evaluation of the structural integrity of key local government facilities in earthquakes, as well as their location relative to areas subject to flooding, landslides, and wildfires.

As part of ABAG's role in developing the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan for the Bay Area, data were collected on the current status of this effort. The focus to date has been on city halls, county administration buildings, and police and fire facilities. Yet even with that limited scope, cities and counties identified an additional \$250 - \$300 million of additional funds needed, largely for seismic retrofits. Even newer buildings may be structurally deficient.



Steel plates welded to cross-bracing during \$4.7 million seismic retrofit of MetroCenter office building in Oakland in 2008 (owned by ABAG, MTC, and BART). The building was constructed in 1983.

A review of the facilities prioritized for retrofit by Bay Area local governments shows that the existing list should be expanded to include facilities that may not be critical during response, but may be critical for recovery, such as public health and social services buildings, senior and community centers, and financial records centers.

In addition, the vulnerability of building contents, particularly files, computers, and other key equipment, should be evaluated. Often, these “nonstructural” assets are less expensive to secure, yet can prevent the facility from being functional.

MORE INFO –

Plan for Finance Department Recovery

Local governments should have plans and back-up procedures to enable them to pay employees, social service recipients, and vendors if normal finance department operations are disrupted.

The Controllers Office of the City and County of San Francisco has established a separate branch for financial systems recovery. It is working to become a “model” for financial services for other Bay Area cities and counties. Their model program currently consists of the following:

- (1) Pre-establishing specific accounting codes to track disaster-related expenditures;
- (2) Reviewing all of the banks and other financial institutions with which the controller's office does business to ensure that they have business continuity plans;
- (3) Making arrangements for alternate locations for paper check distributions for the 15% of the city's 30,000 employees that do not have direct deposit.
- (4) Working with the accounts payable branch to set up the issuance of “debit cards” for city/county clients, particularly for retiree pensions and medical benefits.

One of the more frustrating aspects of current planning for disaster recovery of financial services is that, while most cities and counties now do all accounting electronically, FEMA still requires that all documentation be with paper documents.



Damage to government facilities, such as shown to the Waveland City Hall after Hurricane Katrina, can be devastating if records are not backed up and stored at alternate locations.

MORE INFO –

Plan for Emergency Relocation of Local Government Facilities

Plans should be made for the emergency relocation of local government facilities critical in emergency response, as well as any government facilities with known structural deficiencies or in hazardous areas.

Such plans should include ways to work with local telephone companies to set up phone systems that either preserve pre-disaster phone numbers, or include call forwarding provisions.

In addition, these plans should include public outreach and education on the new locations of these facilities. The public, particularly those with special needs and most in need of government services, may become frustrated and alarmed if “normal” contacts are no longer able to be reached.

The plans may need to emphasize the use of e-mail as a more efficient form of communication with local government employees.

In some cases the relocation plans may need to include working with local transit agencies to ensure continued public access.

Finally, the relocation plan should include access to back-ups of key records and other documents from alternate locations.



The City of Pass Christian in southern Mississippi moved its entire City Hall into portable units following Hurricane Katrina when the City Hall was destroyed.

MORE INFO –

Plan to Repair or Rebuild Local Government Facilities

Plans for prioritizing rebuilding or rebuilding of local government facilities are needed. This decision-making process will largely be based on the degree to which the facility is considered “critical” and the extent of damage suffered by the facility.

The Earthquake Recovery and Reconstruction Guidelines (SCEPP/OES, 1991) recommends the following priority order:

- (1) Repair facilities that contain or provide critical public services and that can be repaired in minimal time;
- (2) Initiate the design and rebuilding processes for government facilities that contain or provide critical public services and require extensive and lengthy repairs or total reconstruction;
- (3) Repair administrative facilities in which little public contact is made but essential support services are provided; and
- (4) Initiate the design and rebuilding processes for local government facilities that are needed primarily for internal administrative purposes.

The recovery process also provides an opportunity to evaluate the existing location of facilities that house government services, particularly if those facilities need to be replaced, not just repaired. Some buildings or facilities might be consolidated to improve economy and efficiency. Some other services might better serve citizens if they are relocated in “branch” offices in several locations in the community.

NOTE: Existing regulations of FEMA (resulting from the requirements of the federal Stafford Act) may put severe limitations on a local government’s ability to make these changes, however. For example, efforts by New Orleans after Katrina to close a police station and use the “saved” FEMA Public Assistance funds to rebuild and enlarge another police station in an area of increased crime (and in a manner to take advantage of better technology) were unable to be funded due to restrictions in the Stafford Act.

One lesson has been re-learned after each disaster: local governments often fail to appreciate the complexity of the recovery process. For example, something as innocuous as repair of city hall may become a nightmare if the building is “historic,” as learned by the City of Bay St. Louis after Hurricane Katrina.



NEXT STEPS FOR ABAG –

The following items are listed for discussion at the August 2008 meeting of ABAG’s Regional Planning Committee meeting.

Most of these suggestions are based on the recommendations of the RPC meeting of December 2007.

The recommendation regarding the Stafford Act is new.

ROLE FOR REGIONAL COORDINATION

ABAG needs to develop and maintain a regional “scorecard” of the best practices related to long-term recovery of government facilities and services described in this document, together with those local governments who have taken the recommended steps. This information is being collected by ABAG using a survey of local government finance, building, planning, and emergency management departments.

ABAG is committed to developing and maintaining a website containing links to background documents and presentations provided to ABAG’s Regional Planning Committee related to recovery. That website is <http://quake.abag.ca.gov/recovery>.

ABAG is a provider of technical assistance. In this role, ABAG has obtained funding from the City of Oakland to develop a model recovery plan for that city based on the planning guidance document developed in 1991 by the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services. This model plan can be used by other local governments in the Bay Area.

COORDINATION WITH STATE AGENCIES

ABAG should continue to work with the State Office of Emergency Services and others to encourage training for finance and human resource departments related to business continuity and documentation of disaster expenses.

ABAG should encourage the use of the state-wide master mutual aid agreement to promote the exchange of finance, human resource, planning, and public works department staff to gain valuable work experience on disaster-related issues and to assist impacted local governments. This program would be similar to existing programs related to fire, police, and building inspection departments.

NEEDED CHANGES IN STAFFORD ACT

The Stafford Act (the federal law providing FEMA with rules on rendering assistance to local governments and individuals following disasters) ties local government hands in the rebuilding process.

As stated on page 2, efforts by New Orleans after Katrina to close a police station and use the “saved” FEMA Public Assistance funds to rebuild and enlarge another police station in an area of increased crime (and in a manner to take advantage of better technology) were unable to be funded due to restrictions in the Stafford Act. Staff recommends that ABAG and other organizations work to design and/or support proposed legislation to modify the Stafford Act to loosen restrictions on the use of Public Assistance funds.

In addition, the current FEMA requirements that all records and requests be made via paper documents needs to be updated.

CREDITS – Prepared by Jeanne Perkins. **PHOTO CREDITS** – J. Perkins–page 1 (left); U.S. Geological Survey–page 1 (right); Stephen Wolf / MTC–page 2 (left); anonymous–page 2 (right); J. Perkins–page 3.