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In this issue of Spotlight on the Region, RPA joins the nation and world in focusing our attention on the disaster and its aftermath on the Gulf Coast. We find that there are lessons for New York in New Orleans, and vice versa, and that hopes for a revitalized Gulf Coast may rest on a new concept known as the mega-region.

Learning from New Orleans, Learning from New York

Among other things, New York City and its environs lack above-ground graves, Dutch-like dikes, and a southern proximity that leaves it vulnerable to Category 4/5 hurricanes. So we shouldn't get too carried away trying to compare New Orleans and New York.

Nevertheless, watching hurricane Katrina destroy a city and much of the region around it, in large part because of a failure to adequately prepare for it beforehand and cope with it afterward, makes you wonder: could anything similar happen here, and are we adequately prepared? Can we learn anything from New Orleans' troubles? And can they learn anything from our recovery from the 9/11 attacks?

When examining the catastrophe in New Orleans, it's clear that there was a massive failure of infrastructure in every sense of the word: physical, human, and bureaucratic. The failure of the levees, part of the physical infrastructure, was compounded by the failure of the bureaucratic infrastructure, principally the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The looting and violence that surfaced in New Orleans showed problems of poverty and culture that had not been adequately addressed. It's clear that the state and national political infrastructure failed to implement a solid plan to protect the city from such a storm and handle long-term problems on the Mississippi River.

Looking at New Orleans' fate, we are reminded that choices have consequences. When we look at the choices we have made here and might make in the future, what are the consequences that we see?

Could It Happen here?

Researchers at RPA, the Army Corps of Engineers and at Columbia, Stony Brook and City universities have modeled what a similar hurricane, or even a 100-year coastal storm, would do to our region. All of them have concluded that even a Category 1 hurricane, more likely here than the larger hurricanes that can hit the Gulf, could be devastating to low-lying coastal areas in all three states.

Like the Gulf Coast, we have built up most of our barrier beaches and islands, and filled up low-lying coastal areas with housing and critical infrastructure, such as airports and waste water treatment facilities. According to the US Climate Change Science Program / US Global Change Research Program, the Northeast has experienced 20% increases in precipitation events. Increases in extreme weather events including ice storms, severe flooding, nor'easters, droughts, and hurricanes are also more frequent.

Storms such as the ice storm of January 1998 that resulted in an extended period of power failure for upstate New York residents, heat waves in 1999 that caused massive energy network overloads within New York City, and six periods of drought over the last 20 years have increased attention on extreme weather events.

How would our emergency services respond? Would our infrastructure be devastated the way similar systems were damaged in New Orleans? Would a crisis affecting hundreds of square miles affect the region differently than an attack on 16 acres in Lower Manhattan?

The answer is that we simply don't know. We do know that our emergency services

generally functioned well in the aftermath of 9/11, although they were hampered by inadequate coordination and communications across political and bureaucratic boundaries. And even though disaster preparedness and emergency management services are more sophisticated and better funded here than on the Gulf Coast, even a minor hurricane or northeast gale could cause enormous damage and disruption to key infrastructure systems. But also like New Orleans, in a major disaster we will depend on FEMA, which proved not up to the job down South. The Tri-State Region should involve itself in the national discussions and examinations over whether FEMA is properly organized, what its mission should be, and who should staff it. Formed in 1979 principally to respond to a nuclear attack and not to national disasters, FEMA's mission has been always been contested and debated, as have the qualifications of those who lead it and staff it. The current debate over how central terrorism should be to its mission takes place in that context.

When looking at recent major storms, we know that the December Storm (or "Perfect Storm") of 1992 inundated the portals of the PATH terminal in Jersey City and flooded the Downtown PATH tunnel, putting this vital piece of infrastructure out of service. The Nor'easter storm also underscored the fact that we have few defenses against this kind of flooding.

In the short term, we need effective contingency plans for evacuations and safeguarding key infrastructure sites, including PATH and subway portals in low-lying areas. In the longer term, we must debate whether New York needs to invest in major flood prevention systems similar to those in place in London, Tokyo and Rotterdam. Douglas Hill, a researcher at Stony Brook University, has proposed a system of retractable flood gates similar to London's Thames Barrier and to Rotterdam's North Sea Barrier, to protect the core of the region from serious flooding in a storm event of this kind. Under Hill's scheme, retracting flood barriers would be installed in the bottom of the Narrows, the Arthur Kill and Long Island Sound at Willets Point. Hill's research also concludes that in many places – apparently including New York – it takes a major disaster and years of subsequent public debate to convince citizens and elected leaders of the importance of investing in systems of this kind. So now is the time to seriously consider whether flood prevention systems are needed to save the core of our region from a disaster like the one facing New Orleans. But we have to consider whether the immense expense of a tidal gate system, for example, is justified by the possible damage that a major storm could cause.

Lessons from 9/11

Although the rebuilding process in Lower Manhattan hasn't always advanced smoothly or without controversy, the immense civic participation does provide important lessons for Gulf Coast residents as they begin to rebuild their region. In general, these efforts recognized three principles for rebuilding that New Orleans should consider: that plans had to address the fundamental problems that the area faced before the disaster; that the planning process had to be organized around the active participation of the public; and that plans had to look beyond the affected area to the broader region.

This process of civic engagement culminated in the July 2002 Listening to the City electronic town meeting, in which 5,000 citizens rejected the initial development plans for the World Trade Center site. Consequently, decisions that could have required years to make were accelerated, speeding the whole rebuilding process. As a result of these efforts, the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan has been underpinned by several major transportation improvements totaling more than \$4 billion, several of them now under construction.

One of the most difficult tasks facing Gulf Coast planners now is to envision how the area can be rebuilt to capitalize on future trends, and not simply replicate an economy that hadn't really thrived for years. They should look at the future of New Orleans and nearby storm-damaged areas in the context of the larger Gulf Coast region extending from Houston to Tallahassee. This is one of several similar emerging US "mega-regions" that are becoming the new competitive units in the global economy, and that are expected to attract 70% of the nation's population growth and 80% of the employment growth by 2050. The emergence of a Gulf Coast mega-region creates an enormous opportunity for the area to rebuild itself for the next economy, not the last one. But to seize this opportunity will require that the region collaborate in new ways to link the economies of growing places like Houston with underperforming places like New Orleans to create advantages for the mega-region.

RPA and researchers at the University of Pennsylvania are now working on a similar economic development and mobility strategy for the Boston-Washington mega-region, and colleagues at Georgia Tech and the Atlanta Regional Council are outlining a similar strategy for the Piedmont Atlantic Mega-region stretching from Raleigh-Durham, NC to Birmingham, AL. By placing rebuilding plans for New Orleans in the larger context of the emerging Gulf Coast mega-region, these plans can address the fundamental economic, environmental, social and mobility challenges that impaired the region's economic prospects and quality of life before Katrina, and set the region on

the course to a brighter future following this catastrophic event.

Jane Jacobs, the esteemed and much cited writer on cities, made the wise observation once that there is a difference between repairing a city after a natural disaster like a hurricane or earthquake, and repairing the structural problems that cause poverty, decay or crime. A quick infusion of material, labor and money can fix the former, but not usually the latter, she said.

Although Jacobs' axiom is true in many ways, events in New Orleans show that there is no clear separation between building long-term infrastructure systems to protect citizens, and to enhance an economy. In general, we in the Tri-State Region can be proud that relative to the rest of the country we have some of the most intensive infrastructure of all types, from transportation systems to education systems, which enable it to be a high-producing, high-value region. But our possible to-do list is long. We should consider tackling what needs to be done not only because such projects could help protect us from natural and man-made disasters, but because they could ultimately help build a more prosperous and stable region.

– *Bob Yaro, RPA President, and Alex Marshall, Editor, Spotlight on the Region.*

Questions Or Comments On What's In This Issue? Send them to the Editor of Spotlight on the Region, Alex Marshall At alex@rpa.org

Calendar

September 12, 8:00 - 9:30 am

Commissioner Iris Weinshall will share her views regarding critical issues facing the New York City Department of Transportation. The event is open to the public and free of charge. Registration is required. Please r.s.v.p. by September 6th online at wagner.nyu.edu/events/. For more information, email mnn2@nyu.edu or call (212) 998-7545.

September 12, 5:30 pm

Planning Chair Amanda Burden and Housing Commissioner Shaun Donovan talk about *new directions in neighborhood planning* and affordable housing in the Mayor's ongoing program to create new neighborhoods and affordable housing opportunities throughout the city. Their presentations will be followed by a discussion with AIA New York Chapter representatives moderated by J. Max Bond Jr., FAIA, and end with questions from the audience. The Center for Architecture Lecture Hall, 536 LaGuardia Place between West 3rd & Bleecker Streets.

October 19

The NYS Department of State, Division of Coastal Resources is pleased to announce the *NYS Community & Waterfront Revitalization Conference*, October 19, 2005, in Farmingdale, New York. Sessions focus on heritage centers and corridors as keys to successful communities. Conference information and registration is available at: www.nyswaterfronts.com/Conference2005.html.

October 19th, 20th and November 7th

RPA, the US Forest Service, the University of Connecticut and The Housatonic Valley Association of Connecticut will host public listening sessions to aid in the U.S. Forest Service study of the *CT Highlands Region*. Meetings will be held in New Milford, CT Torrington, CT and Falls Village, CT respectively. For more information, email rpirani@rpa.org.

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