A STRATEGIC OVERVIEW OF THE “NEW” EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

With the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, it may be tempting to suggest that emergency management has attained a new level of significance in the national consciousness. Indeed, the emergence of the profession and the creation of FEMA itself owe much to the national defense mania of the Cold War era. But, if the past is any indication, the national security concerns that periodically increase public awareness and political attentiveness to the emergency management function do not result in a broad commitment of new resources to the full array of natural and manmade disasters that threaten local communities. Aside from the increased and targeted attention focused on specific and immediate security threats, often without new resources being made available to local governments, the commitment to comprehensive disaster planning and preparedness is generally lacking. Indeed, it could even be suggested that the current national security focus holds as much potential to distract the emergency management profession as it does to increase its operational scope and effectiveness. But perhaps, if the moment is seized, the current crisis and any renewed attention it may bring to emergency management can be an opportunity to recast it as a more vital and strategic component in the future political landscape of the local communities it serves.

Important national security concerns aside, the emergency management profession is presently confronted with the challenge to manage new realities. The analysis presented herein will maintain that this requires expanding the role of the emergency management function beyond its traditional scope. It will also suggest that the emergency manager will require new skills and that the profession must be identified
with the emergency manager as a proactive public actor as much as it is with institutions and technical functions. This suggests that political and organizational analysis, strategic thinking, and leadership may be increasingly important concepts of study for emergency managers. These concepts have already been applied to the analysis and implementation of virtually all other public management functions. They have refocused administrative and organizational analysis into a prescriptive subject matter with a decidedly strategic point of view (Wamsley, 1990; Moore, 1995, Lynn, 1996). Emergency management, relatively oblivious to these developments one might say, is overdue for re-articulation in terms of a more strategic public administration.

What follows is intended to outline a new conceptual framework for the emergency management profession and to suggest a basic organizational theme for its implementation. Essential to this analysis is the recognition that the limitations and inadequacies of what may be called the “old emergency management” must be overcome for the profession to advance. In discussing what may be called the “new emergency management,” it will be argued that the factors that contribute to its environment and the challenges that shape it require a broader, strategic, and more proactive orientation for the emergency management profession.

THE OLD EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

An examination of emergency management literature suggests that, until quite recently, the strategic motivation for the emergency management profession arose from the challenges of responding or reacting to specific and immediate disasters rather than from the recognition of opportunities and the implementation of long term planning. It
had long been demonstrated that emergency management issues were of low salience in most states and communities (Wright and Rossi, 1981; Wolensky and Wolensky, 1990). In fact, the literature often noted indifference or outright opposition to disaster preparedness (Kreps, 1991). Public officials and public administrators in local communities, we were often told, did not fully comprehend the nature of the emergency management function. A basic assumption still prevalent is that emergency management is primarily a “response” function and a concern only for first responders. Other public officials remain uninvolved and assume that they need not learn much about the field (Grant, 1996).

The development of the emergency management function at the local level is a rather recent development and grew out of federal legislation such as the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act of 1986. But even with federal mandates assigning more disaster mitigation and preparedness functions to local governments, emergency management did not quickly become a priority at the local level. Unless a specific hazard was more or less immanent, sustained governmental interest and public support at the local level was difficult to sustain (Perry and Mushkatel, 1984). Policy makers and stakeholders alike have tended to underestimate hazard potentials. They have been inclined to see hazard occurrence as having a low probability and have thus been reluctant to impose limitations on private property, unwilling to bear the costs of hazard preparedness, and altogether ambivalent toward hazard mitigation (Grant, 1996).

Emergency management remained a low priority, a resented un-funded federal mandate, and a responsibility often seen as being somewhat at odds with more important tasks such as economic development. These attitudes unfortunately shaped and restrained the early
development of the emergency management profession in local communities across the country.

From its earliest days, the emergency management function suffered as a result of low political support and scarce resources. In many local jurisdictions it became an add-on or part time responsibility for an already overburdened local official such as a fire chief. Often the individuals appointed to local emergency management directorships had little professional training or experience relevant for the job. As a result of low salience, poor training, and lack of support, the focus of the emergency management professional tended to be narrow, disaster specific, technical, and limited to very specific tasks. This is beginning to change. It is probably more accurate today to say that the emergency management function is on its way to becoming a distinct profession. But there remains a strategic tension that retards the development of the profession. What is lacking is a dynamic model for transforming a once limited function into a contemporary public management role connected to the whole of community life.

Any effort to enhance the professionalism of emergency managers will be frustrated if it is not connected to a strategic orientation that broadens the scope and impact of the profession. Many practicing emergency managers accustomed to the traditional or “old” definition of their role may resist the suggestion of an expanded view of their role, but such a transformation is necessary to promote greater productivity and success in the broader and more strategic environment that shapes the contemporary work of emergency management.

Like it or not, and even as significant progress is being made in improving the technical skills of the profession, emergency management is being relocated in a wider
and more dynamic context. More recent literature in the field is suggesting that emergency management is no longer confined to preparing for, responding to, or recovery from specific disasters. Increasingly, emergency management is seen as an integral part of a more comprehensive community decision-making process. It is increasingly connected to issues such as environmental stewardship, community planning, and sustainable development (Britton, 1999). More analysis is being devoted to emergency management as a component in broader community planning and development activities (Beatley, 1995; Mileti, 1999). The linkage of hazard mitigation, a new emphasis in the field, to the broader task of developing sustainable communities potentially places emergency management at the very heart of community planning (Schneider, 2002). There is a growing consensus that the limited, task oriented, technical, and disaster specific orientation of the old emergency management must be replaced with a broader more strategic framework for the profession.

Without a new framework and a new strategic approach that connects emergency management to the broader issues and community concerns noted above, it will remain in a position of low salience, low stakeholder support, scarce resources, institutional instability, and limited or constrained effectiveness. This new framework for emergency management will require that its operational and technical capacities be linked to the policy setting and stakeholder support bases of the communities it serves. Emergency management organizations must come to see themselves as a part of the dynamic political and social settings in which they work and as having dynamic qualities of their own that enable them to change, adapt, see challenges, identify opportunities, and create long term roles for themselves in the process of community planning and development.
Anchoring emergency management to any strategic or proactive principle is a challenge. It runs contrary to the experience of most emergency managers and certainly contrary to the old emergency management. Even today, most emergency managers are most comfortable with a narrowly defined conception of planning for a particular set of reactive, anticipatory, and planned responses to specific hazards, threats, or emergencies. Emergency management organizations have never been inclined to expand their operational role or their strategic position. This has resulted in a lack of strategic adaptation and lost operating efficiency and the retarding of mission enhancement. In other words, the long term institutional capacity building of emergency management has been constrained and with it the ability to participate in the range of community planning activities for which its professional input is both legitimate and necessary. If emergency management is, as more recent literature suggests, an integral part of broader issues and concerns affecting community life, then it must redefine itself.

THE NEW EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

It is an increasingly common premise that the aim of managerial work in the public sector is to create public value (Moore, 1995). This is to suggest that public managers, including emergency managers, utilize scarce public resources that have value in alternative uses. The challenge is to maximize the value attained through these resources. Managerial success may thus be interpreted as proactively initiating and reshaping public enterprises in ways that increase their value to the publics they are intended to serve (Moore, 1995). One need not delve too deeply into the discussion of public value to see that, in the linkage of emergency management to the broader task of
sustainable community development, there is a broad and potentially dynamic connection
between emergency management and community development that holds the potential
for enhancing the public value of emergency management to the communities it serves.
The challenge is to recast emergency management as a participant in the broad nexus of
institutional and public actors who influence the process of community planning and
development. Sustainable development is the key to this nexus.

Sustainability to the emergency manager usually means that a locality can
withstand and overcome any damage (property damage, lost economic opportunity, etc.)
without significant outside assistance (Mileti, 1999). Hazard mitigation is, more
importantly, the specific emergency management function that ties it to the concept of
sustainability. The fostering of local sustainability in the face of extreme hazard events,
natural or manmade, is a prominent theme in the current emergency management
literature. Emergency managers have been increasingly trained, in assessing and
preparing to face the specific hazard risks that confront their communities, to think in
terms of hazard mitigation. The rationale of hazard mitigation begins with the realization
that disasters are frequently not unexpected. They stem from predictable interactions
between the physical environment and the demographic characteristics of the
communities that experience them. Based on this realization, hazard mitigation takes the
form of advanced action to eliminate or reduce the risks and potential costs associated
with natural and manmade hazards.

In light of the historic and rising costs associated with natural disasters in the U.S.
over the decade of the 1990’s, for example, it has become accepted wisdom that a
preeminent objective of emergency management must be to mitigate hazards in a
sustainable way to stop the trend of increasing and catastrophic losses from natural hazards. It has also, with the passage of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988, become a matter of federal law. In order to reduce the impact of recurrent natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes on human life and property, advanced planning to mitigate the risks associated with them and to reduce the vulnerability of communities is required by this law.

The new emergency management may well be said to have begun with a focus on hazard mitigation. Over the past decade, emergency managers have become more conversant with the concept of structural mitigation. This includes the strengthening of buildings and infrastructure exposed to hazard risks by a variety of well-known means (building codes, engineering designs, construction practices etc.). The purpose of structural mitigation is to increase resilience and damage resistance. Emergency managers have also become increasingly, if somewhat more reluctantly, conversant with the notion of non-structural mitigation as well. Non-structural mitigation includes directing new development away from high-risk locations through land use plans and regulations, relocating existing developments that have sustained damage to safer locations, and maintaining the protective features of the natural environment that may absorb and reduce hazard impacts. The emphasis on hazard mitigation, structural and especially non-structural, brings emergency management into a much broader arena and significantly expands its potential scope and impact. It brings emergency management to the center of the vital task of planning and implementing sustainable community development.
Planning for sustainability, or sustainable development, is a concept originally associated with environmental policy. It has been broadened to include all community planning including planning for economic development. It links concerns for social, economic, and environmental well being in a coordinated process aimed at meeting present needs while preserving the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Emergency management has been increasingly linked to this broader task of sustainable development (Beatley, 19995; Gis and Kutzmark, 1995) and hazard mitigation has been a primary vehicle for that linkage (Mileti, 1999; Schneider, 2002). The emphasis is on reducing the vulnerability of communities to natural and manmade disasters in the context of all other community goals such as reducing poverty, providing jobs, promoting a strong economy, and generally improving people’s living conditions (FEMA, 2000).

The achievement of sustainable development, as a public value, requires responsible choices for determining where and how development should proceed. It requires, from the emergency management perspective, an evaluation by each locality of its environmental resources and hazard risk potential with the result being the making of a series of choices that will impact the economic, social, and physical well being of the community. These choices include the identification of future losses that a community can or is willing to bear. But all public choices relating to these matters must adhere to the value of sustainability as defined in the context of the broader community planning and development process.

All emergency managers know that communities must address the interdependent causes of natural and manmade disasters and come to some decision about which potential risks and losses are acceptable, which are unacceptable, and what specific
actions are necessary to maintain the social, economic, and political stability necessary for the community to flourish. But they seldom perceive this in the context of a broader role for emergency management in community planning. But consider the connection between the two. For example, if a community is seeking to promote sustainability in the face of serious earthquake risks, structural mitigation alone is insufficient. Much more is required than building codes and the like. Sustainability also requires a linkage of policies on building codes to policies on housing density, to policies on urban transit, to policies on social equality, to policies on environmental quality, to policies on economic development, etc. In other words, all policies are linked together by the concept of sustainability. This includes emergency management policy and brings the emergency management function to the table as a participant in community planning.

The goal of building sustainable communities involves, and as a critical component, the emergency management function. The logic of hazard mitigation, a key focus, suggests that a part of ensuring the economic, political, and social development of a community is a full awareness of hazard risks and a plan to mitigate them. Community planning and development must include anticipation of and solutions to identifiable risks associated with potential hazards. But, to the extent that emergency management is unprepared as a profession to assert its relevance to the broader life of the community, to the extent that it remains disaster driven, narrow, and technical in its orientation, the effectiveness and relevance of the new emergency management will be restricted even if there is a greater and growing awareness of its connection to broader issues and concerns. The new and wider context of emergency management requires a new and more broadly engaged emergency management professional.
THE NEW EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONAL

If, as suggested in this analysis, emergency management is to become a critical part of the process of sustainable community development, the profession must come to see itself in a new context. Emergency managers must see themselves as participating with all political and social institutions in a coordinated effort. The primary focus must be on the building of sustainable communities as the fundamental public value to be served by the emergency management function. But the question remains how, in the performing of their specific tasks, can emergency managers organize their work to serve this public value?

As a first step, emergency managers must be trained and prepared to articulate and develop a role for themselves as a participant in the local consensus building effort in their community and to perceive themselves as working on a common agenda with other community institutions and leaders. All relevant public and private stakeholders, as defined in the context of sustainable development, must be brought into the emergency management planning process. Emergency managers, in turn, must be brought in as stakeholders to the network of community leaders and policymakers involved in community planning and development activities.

A second step, to be accomplished as the emergency management function is integrated into the process of community planning, is the definition of the technical components in each phase of the function (risk assessment, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) as a part of a holistic system. This entails, as the most fundamental ingredient, the integration and consistency of all technical components with
integrated policies and programs related to disaster mitigation and sustainability within the community. Hazard or disaster mitigation, in essence, must be the preeminent task that ties emergency management into the value of sustainability and defines its role in the context of community planning and development. It must therefore be elevated to the level of first or primary responsibility for the emergency manager. It must also be elevated to the level of an essential or necessary component in all community planning and development activity.

A third or final step necessary for the new emergency management to succeed as a component in sustainable development is the linkage of all public policies within the community to the concept of sustainability. All policies necessary to promote the social, economic, and political stability necessary for a community to flourish, including emergency management policies, must be linked or integrated in the process of community planning. The end product of emergency management must be understood as fundamentally connected to all facets of community life in a coordinated effort to promote sustainability.

To accomplish the three steps briefly outlined above, emergency management needs to move from the traditional tendency to be reactive and disaster specific. It must broaden its orientation beyond efficient disaster response and recovery operations. Everything we have discussed requires that emergency managers be more proactive by emphasizing hazard mitigation. This ultimately means they must work to become networked in partnerships that involve all community leaders associated with the concept of sustainable development. This is to suggest that they must become public actors in the context of a broader involvement in community planning. To make the necessary and
persuasive case to community leaders, to build networks of support groups and
stakeholders, to establish the strategic linkages with other community leaders and
institutions necessary to bring about this transformation, technical skill alone is
insufficient. The training and education of emergency managers needs to be refocused on
the skills relevant for a more strategic emergency management.

Increasingly, it would seem, advanced educational training at the undergraduate
and graduate level is required for all emergency managers. The sort of training
associated with public administration, including advanced training in leadership,
organizational behavior, strategic planning, analytical methods, and public policy, has
never been more urgently needed. The challenge of articulating a broader role for
emergency management, its vital linkage to the building of sustainable communities, and
its need to emphasize mitigation all suggest that a more proactive professional is needed.
The vital tasks of networking and building relationships within the community of
decision makers, the ability to recognize the opportunities for successful hazard
mitigation in the broader task of sustainable development, and the need for strategic
thinking and leadership all demand that the education of the emergency management
professional take on a new priority and that it represent a broader range of competencies
than the technical skills associated with the field.

Finally, the professional training of all public management professionals should
include a basic foundation in emergency management. Graduate and undergraduate
programs alike should provide more training that reflects the linkage between hazard
mitigation, community planning, and sustainable development. This does not mean that
all public administrators should be cross-trained as emergency managers, but rather that
emergency management should be a component of their professional education. It should include a focus on the value of mitigating hazards in a sustainable way as a critical and necessary component to community planning and development generally. Such training will broaden the understanding that the assessment of hazard potentials and the mitigation against their potential impact is connected to the making of a series of choices that impact the economic, physical, and social well being of the community.

CONCLUSION

The old emergency management tended to be event or disaster driven. Its primary focus was on response and recovery with a narrow focus on technical capabilities. The new emergency management, driven by the development of a stronger emphasis on hazard mitigation and increasingly connected to the concept of sustainable development, requires that the technical components of emergency management be seen as a part of a holistic and more strategic system that connects the emergency manager to the broader concerns of community planning. This requires the integration and consistency of all technical components with integrated policies and programs related to disaster mitigation as it is connected to the building of sustainable communities. Resident in this development is both the opportunity and the need to broaden the definition of the emergency management function. This broadening and redefinition in turn requires a more broadly trained, strategic, and proactive emergency management professional.

The suggestions made herein are intended to further the discussion and analysis of the new emergency management. With a conceptual orientation centered on sustainable development and a practical emphasis on hazard mitigation, the outline for the future of
the profession is clearly visible. The challenge now is to prepare new emergency management professionals for the future suggested by that outline.

**References**


