

Collaborative Community Resilience: Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Planning

HARRIS COUNTY, TX – Harris County is the nation’s third largest county with 34 cities and a population of 4.4 million residents. The County faces significant natural hazards, such as floods, hurricanes, storm surge, and severe thunderstorms. In an effort to mitigate the impacts of these disasters, Harris County adopted a multi-hazard mitigation plan that involves multiple jurisdictions and stakeholders. The County’s multi-jurisdictional mitigation planning process can be viewed as a model of collaborative planning that enhances community resilience and reduces long term vulnerability.

The County’s mitigation plan was originally adopted in 2005, updated in 2010, and updated for a third time in 2015. Since 2005, the plan has grown from 26 jurisdictions to 33 jurisdictions, four Private Non-Profits (PNPs) and several stakeholders. The combination of several partners, subject matter experts and community involvement led to the development of a mitigation plan that truly promotes collaboration and community resilience within the County.



The collaborative planning approach used in Harris County integrates various mitigation efforts of the County and over 30 jurisdictions into a single document. Due to the size and scope of Harris County, the multi-jurisdictional planning process takes approximately two-and-a-half years to update the mitigation plan. This time frame allows each jurisdiction to include its own unique risks, impacts, and vulnerabilities due to natural hazards. “This collaborative approach allows each jurisdiction the opportunity to not only meet FEMA requirements, but also to better familiarize each other with the vulnerabilities and needs of the whole community to enhance resilience,” said Mark Sloan, Harris County Emergency Management Coordinator.

Harris County utilizes a Direct Representation Model, where each jurisdiction participating on the plan maintains its own Local Mitigation Planning Team (LMPT) to coordinate jurisdiction-specific mitigation planning efforts. To coordinate multiple jurisdictions, Harris County also established a Multi-Jurisdictional Planning Team (MJPT), which is a coordinating entity that takes a collaborative approach and allows for consensus building on countywide sections of the plan. The MJPT is chaired by the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HCOHSEM) and consists of individuals that directly represent each jurisdiction. Stakeholders, such as subject matter experts and PNPs, are also involved and attend certain meetings and workshops to provide input for the plan. The major PNPs involved include the Texas Medical Center, St. Dominic Village, Methodist St. Johns Hospital, and Houston Hospice.

The County’s mitigation plan identifies 15 natural hazards and three technological hazards (Dam Failure, Pipeline Failure, and Hazardous Materials). To conduct a thorough Hazard Identification and Risk Analysis (HIRA) a GIS Risk Analysis Team was assembled with GIS professionals from various local agencies to geo-spatially analyze parcel-by-parcel each jurisdiction’s vulnerabilities and risks from natural and technological hazards. The GIS Team produced a uniform risk analysis across all jurisdictions, which allowed for a comparative and standard assessment methodology.

To ensure a holistic approach to community resilience, the public was encouraged to provide input and feedback on the plan. “Having multiple jurisdictions participate served as a force multiplier and increased the

County’s reach across the whole community,” said Francisco Sanchez, Harris County Public Information Officer. Various traditional and emerging mediums were used to connect with the community, such as city websites, social media, and a multitude of local community newspapers. The residents know their communities the best and were able to provide great input to shape the overall mitigation strategies incorporated into the plan.

Community resilience was enhanced by creating a single and unified voice on hazard mitigation, created cross-jurisdictional buy-in and support for mitigation projects, and developed working relationships between emergency managers, floodplain administrators, and other development agencies. In addition, it promoted the maximization of Hazard Mitigation Assistance and how these funding opportunities can assist local jurisdictions. The collaborative planning approach contributed to the success of the plan, which resulted in a 1,200 page document with more than 670 mitigation projects to reduce long term vulnerability in the County.

PROMOTE CHANGE

Collaborating with local jurisdictions and stakeholders allowed the County to better use existing resources and expertise within the community. “The last two updates were conducted in-house with community resources, such as local GIS professionals, local planners and local subject matter experts,” said David Alamia, Harris County Mitigation Planner. Through collaboration the County was able to produce a mitigation plan that addresses the community’s unique risks, reduces vulnerabilities, and enhances community resilience. This was achieved through shared resources with no assistance from outside contractors, consultant firms, or federal planning grants. Collaboration within the County provides a cost savings of approximately \$120,000 when managed in-house with local partners.

TAKE ACTION

Collaboration enables the community to maintain a “local perspective” to the plan and create “community buy-in,” which is made more difficult when the plan is developed by outside consultants or vendors. As the expiration date for your community’s mitigation plan approaches, consider developing a collaborative planning approach by establishing a multi-jurisdictional planning team, pooling resources and expertise from the community, using in-house staff and effectively involving the public in hazard mitigation planning.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Collaborative mitigation planning ultimately benefits all jurisdictions and stakeholders, because the plan serves as a gateway to Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) grants, which include Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM), Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA). In Harris County, the plan enabled local jurisdictions to maximize HMA funding opportunities with approximately \$433 million awarded since 2005.

For more information on the Harris County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan, please visit <http://www.readyharris.org> or <http://www.hcoem.org>.