

November 16, 2023

MEMO TO: David M. Raatz, Director, Office of Council Services

F R O M: Sam Tanck, Legislative Analyst *ST*  
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SUBJECT: **WEBINAR “DEFINING AND BUILDING CAPACITY FOR DISASTER MITIGATION”** (PAF 23-021(20))

We attended “Defining and Building Capacity for Disaster Mitigation”, a webinar hosted by the National Association of Counties on September 20, 2023. The purpose of the webinar was to understand how County officials work with their State and Federal counterparts to build capacity for disaster resilience. A link to the presentation can be found here:

[PowerPoint Presentation \(naco.org\)](https://www.naco.org/resources/presentation)

The webinar was led by Mathew Sanders, Senior Officer of the U.S. Conservation Project at The Pew Charitable Trusts, Washington, D.C. The panel members included:

- The Honorable Archie Chaisson, III, President, Lafourche Parish Government; Director of Public Works, Thibodaux, Louisiana; and Vice Chairman of NACO’s Environment, Energy and Land Use Committee and the Gulf States Counties and Parishes Caucus.
- Megan Houston, Chief Resilience Officer, Palm Beach County, Florida
- Ben Duncan, Chief Resilience Officer, South Carolina Office of Resilience, Columbia, South Carolina.

Mr. Sanders summarized the following key findings from the “Intergovernmental Roundtable On Disaster Resilience” conference that took place in Washington D.C., on February 10, 2023:

- State and local reliance on federal funding for disaster resilience is significant, but capacity to seek federal funds varies.
- Emergency management offices are not well equipped to lead on mitigation and resilience, but should be strong partners at the table.

- When possible, counties should incentivize resilience activities through zoning and planning authority.
- Partnerships with universities and the private sector allow counties to pool resources and operate across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Promote a reasonable perception of risk to help communities better understand and prepare for current and future hazards and vulnerabilities.
- Budget authorities need additional education on risk and resilience to better understand the value of investing in assessments, plans, and projects.

Mr. Sanders also shared the “6 Elements of Capacity for Disaster Resilience”:

1. Funding for mitigation planning and project implementation.
2. Staffing and, in some cases, dedicated agencies.
3. Authority to enact policy and practices that support mitigation efforts.
4. Effective, strategic partnerships.
5. Ability to collect, analyze, and interpret data for decision making.
6. Education and improved perception of risk.

Next, Mr. Sanders facilitated a roundtable discussion between the panelists. Following is a summary of the discussion organized around specific questions:

### **How do you define resilience?**

- Ms. Houston said resilience is a way to integrate restoration and sustainable elements into development. Resilience measures must address the needs of all individuals impacted, including future generations, differently abled folks, and those at a financial disadvantage.
- President Chaisson said resilience is anticipating disasters by:
  - Conducting climate change initiatives.

- Incentivizing private investments to participate in restoration.
- Reviewing and revising subdivision regulations.
- Mr. Duncan added that resilience is lessening hazardous weather and disasters that impacts society, the economy, citizens, and natural resources.

**Why is it important to have an independent resiliency office? How does your resiliency office work with outside partners?**

- Mr. Duncan said an office provides assistance to all counties, namely ones that ordinarily do not have access to the resources necessary for long-term recovery.
- President Chaisson reported that an office takes the work that starts with emergency responders and sees it through the long-term recovery phase and plays a major role in applying for grants.
- According to Ms. Houston, an office is a small team that isn't bound by statutory requirements. Rather, it conducts long-term planning with a focus on:
  - Assessing how changing conditions impact business operations and "County Capital Planning."
  - Seeing how the county can integrate the information gathered in the business assessments to adjust plans going forward.

**How does your county begin the discussion around communities that will need to relocate? Who pays for relocation?**

- President Chaisson said that, as an example, there is a state-recognized tribal-group in his county that previously lived on an island. Public and private institutions have made resiliency efforts to keep the tribal-group on their land, but those efforts lost efficacy. After some time, the county spent \$48 million to move the tribal-group of approximately 30 members inland. He recommends making any necessary changes to the landscape of the new land before moving a community.

- Mr. Duncan provided the following examples of actions South Carolina has taken to relocate communities, to include:
  - Using federal funding to purchase ten houses in Burlington, South Carolina where pollutants had contaminated land and water.
  - Purchasing 60 homes in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina where recent development caused nine floods in five years, when there had been no flooding in the previous 30 years. The average home value was only \$25,000, so the state imposed a minimum purchase price that would allow these families to purchase homes in the same county.
- Ms. Houston shared that her county focuses more on planning and creating zoning that incentivizes resilient homes.

**What can be done to ensure that residents in high-risk areas are given access to affordable insurance?**

- President Chaisson said his county has encouraged the state legislature to create a \$45 million grant program to incentivize insurance companies to provide coverage for Louisiana citizens. The grant resulted in an additional nine insurance companies writing coverage for homeowners in Louisiana.
- Ms. Houston said her county encourages partnerships that result in proactive investments, reassuring insurance companies regarding future risk.
- Mr. Duncan's county takes a proactive approach and attempts to mitigate future natural disasters to prevent insurance companies from moving out-of-state. This approach can be seen in Governor McMaster dedication of \$200 million to the state's Disaster Relief and Resilience Reserve Fund, to be used for planning and implementing nature-based solutions to reduce flood risk.

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We hope you find this information useful. Please let us know if we can provide anything further.

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