



JOHN GLENN, CRP

Editorializing

New FEMA boss pushes mitigation

JOHN GLENN, CRP

Certified Business Continuity & Disaster Recovery Planner

James Lee Witt, the well-respected former boss of FEMA, changed the organization's direction from "disaster recovery" to "disaster prevention" following Hurricane Andrew.

A number of projects – most notably **Project IMPACT** – were put into place during his watch to encourage and help local governments and private citizens implement disaster condition avoidance and mitigation measures.

Mr. Witt learned from Hurricane Andrew that it pays to protect.

Now comes the new FEMA director, Joe M. Allbaugh.

I'm pleased to see Mr. Allbaugh "getting tough" with politicians who refuse to protect their constituency.

I'm thinking mainly of a River City in Iowa and its city council which apparently values a river view more than the town's welfare.

To be fair, there were only "several million" dollars estimated damage to the town when the river over-flowed its banks; the hastily laid sandbags held. But if they failed . . . By the way, how much did the sandbagging operation cost? Hauling the sand [at today's outrageous fuel prices], loading the bags day and night [don't forget the electric bill or more fuel for portable generators], personnel time. And now, consider the stress on the people hoping the sandbags would save their property, the stress on the people working to lay the sandbags, the stress on the family members waiting for their loved ones to return home – and maybe to protect their own property. Somehow I think the "several million" may be a conservative estimate.

The small Illinois town across the river was high and dry, protected by a flood wall.

Funds may dry up before waters

Our new FEMA director very bluntly told River City not to expect money from FEMA to rebuild after this flood.

It seems, however, his remark was “taken out of context.” He was “talking about the country in general” he said before a rolling camera and sound system.

OK, that’s even better – that explanation, as I recall my English classes – includes River City and all the other communities which elect to forego disaster prevention and mitigation measures, even when the measures are at least partially funded by our favorite Uncle (Sam).

I lived many years in South and Central Florida and it always bothered me to see houses built on the beaches. Even houses on stilts.

We know, you and I, that a halfway decent storm will wash away sufficient sand to cause many a million-dollar manse to tumble into the roiling waters. (Even a stuffy business continuity planner sometimes can get carried away with his own turn of phrase.)

We know, the two of us, that while we have technology to build hurricane and tornado-proof rooms, most people won’t spend the money.

It is human nature.

Even some corporations are guilty of the “it can’t happen here” attitude (even, in one 800-pound gorilla’s case, when “it” does happen – again and again).

The carrot and the stick

Mr. Witt had the beginning of the “right idea.” He had the “carrot.”

Now comes along Mr. Allbaugh and he is threatening to use the “stick.”

Maybe I am “mean-spirited,” an ogre, a grinch, or any other disparaging term, but I think repeatedly paying someone for “disaster recovery” when “disaster prevention” is needed is foolish.

I don’t want to pay for anyone’s clean up ***if the mess could have been avoided.*** (On the other hand, I will be first in line to help prevent a disaster condition from recurring.)

Bottom line, according to FEMA’s new boss – and one with which I agree 101 percent - is if you (city fathers, John Q. Public) don’t do something to help yourself, don’t come asking Uncle to bail you out – again.

It seems to me that running to Uncle for a handout to repair damage that **could have been avoided** is the same thing as a healthy, educated person running to

Uncle for a handout. Most of us, even the most liberal, would not countenance putting such a person on the dole.

While I am **not** suggesting that FEMA funds should dry up for every event, or that welfare be denied the deserving, I am suggesting that FEMA should wield the stick; if a community **had** the opportunity to protect its citizens ... time, finances, manpower ... and **failed** to protect its citizens, FEMA should close its checkbook and walk away. (Remember, the governing boards sit at the pleasure of the citizens; if the board members fail to do the taxpayers' bidding, the taxpayers should throw the rascals out.)

We expect public companies to have business continuity plans – not just disaster recovery or contingency plans, but continuity (mitigation) plans; if they lack plans, the principals can in some cases be taken to task by the Federal or State governments or by semi-governmental agencies; all can be confronted by stockholders and other investors.

We should hold our local officials, and ourselves, to the same standards.

Call it a father's "tough love," but if my trio fails to work to help themselves, they won't get much help from Dad.

FEMA may need to apply some "tough love" to encourage people to look at risks to their interests and to find ways to avoid or mitigate those risks. FEMA can, and I think properly should, help implement measures now to eliminate or reduce the need for recovery efforts later.

On the other hand

There is a "flip side" to the tirade above.

As the Corps of Engineers has proven time and time again, when a river is restricted to its banks, the down-river communities have to contend with more water flowing toward them at a faster and more destructive rate.

Somewhere along the river someone must be willing to create a temporary lake to slow down the water's flow and to perhaps direct some of it to create or refresh wetlands.

As with any good business continuity plan, we need to look at the ripple effects that may simply move our problem downstream.

'Course if we could just direct this surfeit of water to the drought areas ...

Parting thought

The place is Daytona Beach, Florida.

For years people were allowed to drive, slowly and cautiously, on the sandy beach. Then the city fathers banned most motorized vehicles from the beach.

Daytona now has an erosion problem it hasn't had since before the arrival of cars on the sand.

Seems the cars rolling up and down the beach packed down the sand, preventing much of the erosion that is the price of Atlantic storms.

Ripple effect.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Glenn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

John Glenn has been involved with business continuity planning & disaster recovery for Fortune 100s since 1994. Direct comments to JGlennCRP@yahoo.com.

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