

**United States House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis**

**Hearing on December 11, 2019
“Creating a Climate Resilient America:
Smart Finance for Strong Communities”**

Questions for the Record

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The Honorable Garret Graves

- 1. It is extremely important to begin the recovery process as quickly as possible after a disaster, and you know this well having recently suffered from Hurricane Harvey. In your opinion, what are the top two roadblocks that have kept your response to Harvey from being the most efficient and successful way to expedite disaster recovery at the lowest possible cost?**

Many recovery activities are locally initiated immediately after the first stage of response; long term recovery committees are established, chambers of commerce reach out to returning businesses, schools coordinate openings with returning residents, and volunteers and advocacy groups begin working with homeowners to begin repairs and bring stability and hope. Local governments assess their emergency reserves and options for debris pick up and ensuring basic services are working and their communities are safe. The role of federal assistance in recovery should not be overlooked. It is a critical part of helping communities bounce back after a disaster and to successful recovery of local economies.

After working through several disasters over the past 15 years, there are two consistent phenomena that get in the way of rapid recovery. It is important to understand that I am referring to recovery and not the initial response immediately after a disaster. 1) The hope of quickly delivered federal funds coupled with caution that only certain things will be covered by the federal assistance. Help is on the way, but only for certain things, and the funding has a lot of requirements that don't necessarily line up with the most effective projects, and the rules are somewhat different each time so how do we proceed with recovery? Substantial time and effort is spent considering what do we fund locally and what is too large to fund locally or is a better fit for federal funds? With housing the effect is amplified due to extensive qualification and eligibility criteria that result in approximately 1 in 4 applicants receiving assistance. And when we add on the complexity of numerous federal agencies all offering individualized types of recovery funding, communities end up chasing possible aid and can encounter rerouting (“We can't fund that, that is a USACOE project”) and become discouraged and fatigued while waiting for approvals. Which takes me to the second major roadblock. 2) The long delays in moving

funds from the federal government to communities and citizens in need of help. It's a strange limbo or purgatory. An announcement comes that Congress has approved recovery funds and help is on the way. Then there is a wait for federal register announcements and guidance- which is an important and critical step to make sure funds are appropriately programmed and spent – but takes too long. Homes that could have been quick and efficient repairs deteriorate and become more costly tear-down and replacement projects. And households remain fragile longer and have an effect on local economies and the social fabric of a community. It is often the case that communities wait more than a year after a disaster to receive the first disbursements of recovery aid. Housing and infrastructure damage advances during this time and becomes more costly to address and recovery is slower than it could be.

2. I appreciate your comment that economic resiliency and financial strength rarely get the attention and consideration it merits because it is often overshadowed by infrastructure and housing needs after natural disasters.

a. How can we do better up front with pre-disaster mitigation?

First launch a national campaign, an aspirational message, that we all have a role in preparing our communities, businesses and homes to withstand disasters and to strengthen our ability to bounce back after adversity. That individuals, community organizations, employers, cities, counties, states, and our federal government are all in this together to support and hold each other accountable. That we should not shy away from the need to understand our individual and community vulnerabilities and the risks they bring in a period of more active weather and more frequent storms. To raise awareness that mitigation is much less costly than recovery. And then to invest (individual, private sector, and government) in real projects and initiatives that have noticeable impact on improving our economies and communities. Tie federal aid to a demonstrated understanding of mitigation needs and actions. An example for communities could be fire-wise programs or the community rating system, comprehensive mitigation plans that also address economic resiliency, and financial literacy training for individuals. Its important to understand that mitigation is not just physical infrastructure but also includes local economies.

b. What are some examples of projects in your region that could be financed now to achieve best use federal funds and achieve cost savings?

I'll offer three very different projects that could have a high return on investment.

1) Relocating a severe bend in a section of railroad that cuts through the heart of one of our small cities in a growing county. Locally referred to as the Dayton candy-cane due to its location and hook-like configuration, the rail and roadway configurations result in frequent and substantial delays in the movement of goods and people, hampers evacuation and emergency services and limits economic development and resiliency in one of our rural counties on the edge of urban growth. The County has worked with our regional council to develop an alliance with local governments, the private sector, and State and Federal funding agencies to reconfigure the rail and roadways, establish proper overpass options, and open up a portion of the County that has been cut off from economic development. This project will also create flood mitigation opportunities within the city, create a more vibrant downtown and commercial district, and

increase the options of freight movement out of our major seaport, improving local and regional economic resilience. Despite commitments of local, private and government transportation funding, the project has a substantial funding gap that could be met with federal mitigation funds. The link is improved evacuation routes, better drainage, and a stronger economy. This project illustrates the new perspectives that need to be adopted as we look to increase economic resiliency by preparing for natural disasters while also looking to strengthen local economies and increase public safety. Traditional thinking tends to focus on very specific pieces of infrastructure like culverts, floodway improvements and shoreline protection which are important – but often don't have well-developed links to their impact on a community's economic resilience and accelerating economic development.

2) Upgrades to the water supply system in one of our rural cities. Damaged by Hurricane Ike and further impacted by soil contraction during a recent historic drought, the city water system experienced decreases in water pressure in portions of its water supply system and portions of the community did not have adequate hydrant pressure to support fire fighting trucks. One of the affected areas included a business park and several businesses were prepared to leave the community because their enterprises could not be served in the event of fire. The city purchased a pumper-style fire truck (which transports its own water) to meet fire suppression needs and businesses remained in the community – but growth and resiliency are not at levels that could be achieved with a proper functioning system. It is important to note that the fire truck was purchased using a federally-funded recovery loan through the Economic Development Administration and administered by our regional council. Mitigation funds that are not tied back to specific disasters – but are designed to better prepare and strengthen communities against disasters would be a good fit for the water supply project. The community is working hard to serve the needs of its residents and businesses. Additional investment of federal funds would help cure a chronic problem and accelerate their ability to withstand future disasters.

3) Relocation of a wastewater treatment plant in one of our coastal communities. One of our cities has completed the appropriate planning and land acquisition to relocate its sewer facility from a highly vulnerable location along the coast of Galveston Bay. Local officials have worked diligently to secure local funding and work through federal recovery funding requirements. The project has been a priority for several years. An additional investment of mitigation funds (on top of recovery funds) would further strengthen the proposed new facility and increase the community's ability to maintain essential services and speed up the return of its residents after future storms. I provide this example as a situation where persistence in a local and federal partnership has paid off and a small additional investment could increase the return on investment.

c. Can you provide your thoughts about how communities can obtain a healthy tax base in order to have that economic resiliency and be better prepared for when disaster strikes?

Resist the temptation to grandfather structures from compliance with new flood elevation codes. Invest in code enforcement and assistance programs that result in durable housing. Consider tax incentives for homeowners and businesses that implement improvements that strengthen their ability to endure less damage and disruption from disasters (go above and beyond minimum

requirements). Work with banks and financial institutions to leverage community reinvestment act funds to increase the fiscal literacy and financial security of their residents. Understand where their residents work (often outside the immediate community) and partner with other communities to ensure jobs and employers are stable and diverse (be aware of the adverse effects of being a bedroom community for an employer outside the community).

3. You make an important point that the solution is not as simple as increasing funding, that we can spend the money already available better and more efficiently. Where and how can we do that? Which federal agencies or programs have you encountered where this inefficiency is happening?

Consider designating an agency to coordinate various recovery and resiliency funding streams to reduce rerouting of funding requests (“can’t fund that here, try another agency”). FEMA’s ESF-14 function could be a framework worth revisiting. The Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration’s funding integration effort in Region VI (bringing a full suite of funding partners out to regions to consider projects in a workshop setting) is an excellent example of reducing the silos of funding agencies and focusing on a more efficient approach to federal investment.

Agencies who are tasked to undertake massive amounts of recovery funding can become semi-paralyzed with the intense scrutiny and responsibility of programming billions of dollars. This results in delays (see comment 1 above), frustration, reduced efficiency, and investment in eligible projects that maybe important but not necessarily the highest priorities of local communities. Increasing flexibility by focusing on projects and investments that make a community stronger (not just build back) and reducing restrictions on which agency can fund which projects would substantially increase efficiency and speed up the delivery of federal assistance to communities in need.

4. From your experience in emergency management, do you think the public adequately knows what resiliency means and what role they have in preventing it?

Terms like resiliency and mitigation are somewhat abstract and can be hard for the public to nail down – and as a result can mean very different things to different people and also sound like something someone else or an organization needs to do (like a corporation or government). Terms like prepared, durable, strong, and bounce-back are aspirational and can be easily tacked to individual and community goals and actions. “How can I help my neighborhood bounce back after a flood? How can I be better prepared if the factory shuts down and I don’t get paid for a month? Voting for the bond will help prepare and protect my neighborhood.” These simple shifts to less bureaucratic words can help.

a. Do community leaders?

The considerations regarding word choice and messaging mentioned above can become even more important when considered at the level of community leaders. Are we seeking to make our schools more resilient or is better prepared and safer the message/goal? Are we investing in

more resilient roads, housing, and drainage or more durable roads and higher quality housing (via codes and ordinances)? Another consideration is that mitigation and resiliency projects can take longer than office terms and be less of a priority than immediate short-term needs expressed by the constituents of elected officials. Lastly, economic development traditionally focuses on large-prize ventures and can result in communities being overly reliant on a single employer or a single type of business. There is a natural appeal in attracting a large employer – say one that brings 500 jobs. But a local economy can better weather down turns and disruption with a diversity of 10 employers each providing 50 jobs. Conventional thinking tends to focus on the immediate short-term result and will require a shift in thinking that considers how economic development decisions affect resiliency.

b. What about leaders in small and rural communities? How do we educate them to be ready for extreme weather events?

Work with networks and national organizations that support small and rural counties like the National Association of Counties and the National League of Cities. Leverage the strong relationship with federal agencies that have high levels of knowledge about small and rural communities and a proven track record in improving communities – specifically USDA and the Economic Development Administration. Allow flexibility in existing funding streams to help build capacity since local government staff and community leaders in these areas often wear many hats and can benefit from targeted technical assistance. The earlier comments regarding clarity of language and word choices in messaging are universal and apply here, too.

c. What role should the federal and local governments have to further education of risk and resiliency in their communities?

A critically important role to show that we are all in this together and need to work together to be better prepared and adapt to future threats. See earlier responses regarding launching a “We are stronger together” aspirational campaign, items 2.a., 2.c., and 4.a.