

Lessons in Recovery: Case Study on Recovering Through Partnerships



Central Arkansas: Building Back Better

Following a tornado outbreak in 2014, over 29 governmental and non-governmental entities were involved in recovery efforts focused on two towns in Faulkner County, Arkansas: Vilonia and Mayflower. Each organization brought unique strengths to the table that were instrumental in supporting the recovery process. This case study is written one year post event, with a focus on the following achievements:

- Local recovery steering teams created.
- Peer consultation for guidance and lessons learned.
- Economic analysis of cities indicated new opportunities.
- Local Disaster Recovery Manager hired.
- Public input gathered through a myriad of processes.
- Dynamic designs developed to help the community visualize projects.
- Zoning and codes written, enabling project designs to become a reality.
- Recovery plans completed in time for adoption at one year anniversary.

The Storm

Shortly after 7:00 pm Central Daylight Time on April 27, 2014, an outbreak of severe weather spawned a super-cell¹ approximately 16 miles northwest of Little Rock, Arkansas. The storm rapidly intensified resulting in an EF-4 tornado (wind speeds of 166 - 200 mph), which touched down near Mayflower and Vilonia in Faulkner County and tracked nearly 41 miles until it finally dissipated. A Major Disaster Declaration was issued on April 29 for the incident period of April 27-28.²

¹A supercell is a long-lived (greater than one hour) and highly organized storm feeding off an updraft (a rising current of air) that is tilted and rotating (<http://www.nssl.noaa.gov/education/svrwx101/thunderstorms/types/>).

² Designated DR-4174.

The path of destruction this storm left in its wake included 12 fatalities, 91 injuries, and severe damage to public and private property. In Vilonia, the tornado destroyed or incapacitated 70 percent of businesses overnight; in Mayflower, nearly 30 percent of businesses were impacted. The Vilonia School District's new \$13 million Intermediate School facility, scheduled to open in August 2014, had to be razed and rebuilt. Hundreds of homes were damaged or destroyed in both communities.

Vilonia has a population of 4,226³ while Mayflower has about 2,234 people. Both are considered "bedroom communities," or commuter hubs to nearby Conway and Little Rock. These two communities have relatively small staffing for government, and many of the city officials have multiple duties and execute jobs in several sectors so that staffing levels can be kept to a minimum. When queried about local capacity and expected recovery requirements, city officials expected to find many of the aspects of recovery taxing for their small teams.

National Disaster Recovery Framework

One of the most challenging aspects of disaster recovery is rebuilding while struggling to create a support network of organizations that can provide assistance. To assist Faulkner County with this undertaking, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), with the State of Arkansas, activated the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) to bring federal, state, and regional experts together to advise community decision-makers on how to best achieve effective recovery. A Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator (FDRC) was appointed along with two Recovery Support Functions (RSF), the FEMA-led Community Planning and Capacity Building (CPCB) RSF and the Economic RSF, under the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA).

Coordination

The Economic Recovery Support Function, as lead by EDA, quickly assembled a stakeholder task force of State and Federal partners, then developed a bi-weekly coordination meeting as a forum to report challenges and opportunities. The biweekly events enabled partners to connect and discuss potential coordination opportunities as a collective, without demanding a significant portion of time. As stated below, much of the collaboration also occurred during smaller group sessions and one-on-one meetings. A concerted effort was put forth in the first months to identify and talk to as many pertinent partners as possible. These first conversations often led to networking with other partner agencies.



Figure 1: Key stakeholders convene to discuss potential coordination opportunities.

Amy Whitehead, Director at the University of Central Arkansas' Center for Community and Economic Development said this about creating partnerships: "You need one point person to have critical one-on-one conversations with stakeholders. There is only so much that can get done in a large group setting such as the coordination meetings. If I had not been personally, privately approached to brainstorm my involvement, been given a deeper understanding of the moving pieces of the recovery and the organizations that were involved, and heard directly about existing needs and where I might plug in, I would not have committed funding and programmatic assistance."

³ 2013 U.S. Census Bureau.

Steering Committees

Having a local steering committee that meets regularly provides a forum for establishing direction and gives a point of reference for other agencies and resources to be directed. Without an active local committee, there will be too many demands placed on mayors or other single points of contact and opportunities will be missed.

A galvanizing force began working in Vilonia in July, when 200 people attended an open public meeting to discuss overall recovery efforts. There was an emphasis on coming to an agreement on how the city would progress, and how the city could use this opportunity as the catalyst for change. “This meeting is just getting folks together. We have a great opportunity to rebuild and we need to plan for it,” said Marty Knight; Chair of Rebuild Vilonia.⁴

As a result, community and business leaders in Vilonia formed the group “Rebuild Vilonia.” Committee leaders consisted of the Mayor, Chamber of Commerce President, a representative from the business community and a project manager as the Chairman. They became the direct interface between the city and all other partners, including the task force the EDA had created, and took on the task of developing a recovery plan for Vilonia.

Mayflower Mayor Randy Holland appointed a Mayflower-specific committee to focus on their city’s issues. The committee members included a local banker, business owners, a city council member and citizens at large, and acted in much the same way as Rebuild Vilonia.

Peer-to-peer Recovery Workshop with Joplin, Missouri

Local officials in Arkansas asked how other communities handled recovery. In response, the CPCB RSF coordinated with national networks and used FEMA capabilities to fund Joplin officials travel to Faulkner County to discuss tornado loss and recovery. In August, the chair of Joplin’s Citizens Advisory Recovery Team, the Disaster Recovery Coordinator for the city, and the communications director for the Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce traveled to Faulkner County to meet with local officials and community leaders to share their experiences and insights into disaster recovery.

The two day interaction left the local group energized and prepared to continue the work of rebuilding their communities with a clear roadmap of activities. Joplin’s recovery plan and process⁵ was emulated throughout the Faulkner County recovery including: methods of public input, sectors of focus (economic development, housing/neighborhoods, schools/community facilities, and infrastructure/environment), methods of organizing and an overall sense of the importance of communicating with the public as openly as possible. This case study is a record of many of the lessons learned that were passed from Joplin to Faulkner County.

The Focus Group Sessions

Focus groups were convened to help organize people and ideas regarding recovery needs and solutions. From July 21 to August 4, 2014, The FDRC, State Disaster Recovery Coordinator, State agencies and the CPCB and Economic RSFs supported sessions designed to capture the views of key community stakeholders about recovery needs facing Vilonia, Mayflower and Faulkner County.

Thirteen focus group sessions were held altogether. Participants were identified by the mayors and local leaders. Meeting times were announced, and groups of between four and six people gathered for two hours, during which, facilitated discussions around disaster issues and opportunities occurred. The conversations

⁴ “Vilonia set for rebuilding following tornado.” The Cabin.

<http://thecabin.net/news/local/2014-07-09/vilonia-set-rebuilding-following-tornado>.

⁵ Joplin Citizens Advisory Recovery Team (CART): <http://joplinareacart.com/>.

were recorded in detailed notes, broken into individual comments and sorted into recovery themes. These categories and themes formed the basis for compiling two data books of results: one for Vilonia, and one for Mayflower.

This effort culminated with a workshop that convened all focus group members, who read the books, discussed the feedback, wrote a vision and set priorities. This early outreach gave a good indication of where recovery efforts should be concentrated and provided focus through a fairly low-intensity process.

Arkansas Community Foundation

The projects and initiatives that came out of the focus groups were discussed with all partners, including the Arkansas Community Foundation. The Community Foundation was able to use this information to make sure that they funded projects that were priorities of the cities. Providing funders with information allowed them to make the most of limited dollars.

*David Johnson, Vice President for community investment, had this to say: "In the days after the April 2014 tornado in Faulkner County, Arkansas Community Foundation was the fortunate recipient of numerous charitable gifts to support relief and recovery efforts in Vilonia and Mayflower. The only challenge for us was making the most out of those generous gifts. We were brand new to the disaster recovery role, and we didn't have the staff resources to deploy to vet potential projects. That's when FEMA called. Fortunately, FEMA, with numerous staff on the ground, was able to offer the very guidance that we needed. With FEMA's help, we identified deserving organizations and local government agencies that were in the process of rebuilding their communities, and we granted to them over \$300,000. The experience was very rewarding for Arkansas Community Foundation, and we truly felt that we had a positive impact in recovery efforts in Faulkner County. We couldn't have asked for a better partner than FEMA."*⁶

Economic analysis showed gaps and leakage

The Economic Recovery Support Function, as part of its mission, conducted an in-depth empirical analysis of the economic status of both communities prior to the incident, and an assessment of their economic conditions after the tornado. The EDA worked closely with University of Arkansas at Little Rocks' Institute for Economic Advancement, to leverage their expertise and access to economic databases and analysis tools.

Data indicated that there was significant economic leakage (dollars going out of the local economy) due to a shortage of business activity in certain economic sectors. In addition, a location quotient (the concentration of firms within economic sectors such as manufacturing or professional services in comparison to national averages) analysis was conducted. These analyses identified opportunities for both communities to generate new economic opportunities and keep more dollars within their local economies. As the Chair of Rebuild Vilonia stated, "Folks like living here, but when it comes to shopping, entertainment or dining out, we go somewhere else, the money we spend outside of our town could be funding the kind of public infrastructure we see in other communities."⁷

Based on the data shown, Mayflower could be emerging as a bedroom community for Conway; this is shown through the rise of multiple service-related sectors. One of the fastest growing of these sectors in Mayflower is residential remodeling. Property management, building material dealers, and flooring contractors are also in the top five, all of which could indicate population growth. Leveraging that growth through recruitment of

⁶ Email communication from David Johnson to Charlie Cook FEMA, May 14, 2015.

⁷ "Vilonia town meeting addresses development for a vibrant future." The Cabin.

[http://thecabin.net/news/local/2015-02-20/vilonia-town-meeting-addresses-development-vibrant-future.](http://thecabin.net/news/local/2015-02-20/vilonia-town-meeting-addresses-development-vibrant-future)

new businesses into the communities to fill needs in the local economy while diversifying the economic base may increase economic resilience in the event of future incidents.

Local Disaster Recovery Manager/Central Arkansas Planning and Development District (CAPDD)

The Central Arkansas Planning and Development District (CAPDD) received a grant from the Economic Development Administration in October of 2014 to focus on recovery efforts in Faulkner County. The grant was used towards hiring a Local Disaster Recovery Manager (LDRM), contracting with a university to create project designs, and creating recovery plans. Having a full time LDRM gave the cities the capacity to implement initiatives developed through their volunteer steering committee.

CAPDD and the LDRM entered a post-disaster environment that already included many stakeholders and ongoing initiatives, which required a concerted effort to incorporate the LDRM, designs and planning initiatives into what had already taken place.

Once the LDRM was on board, a joint strategy session was held to create a task-oriented timeline that would gather public input, incorporate all parties and deliver a recovery plan by the one year anniversary.⁸



Figure 2: Devin Howland (left), LDRM, discussed several opportunities with local stakeholders during an open public meeting.

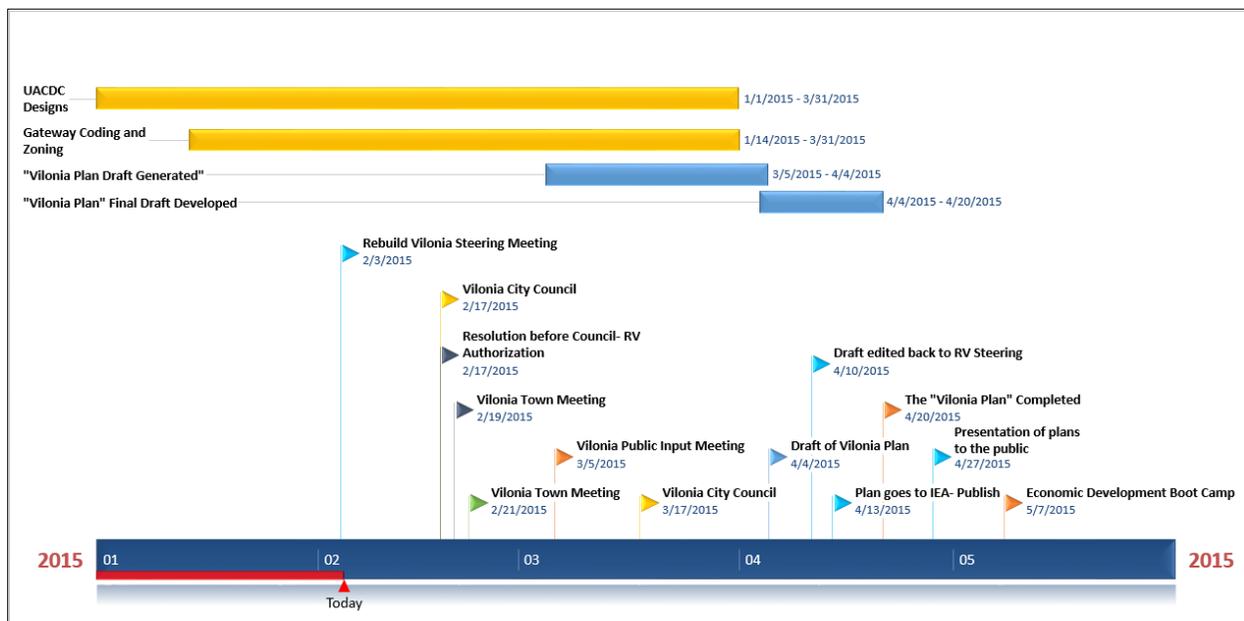


Figure 3: An example of a task-oriented timeline used to drive the recovery planning process.

Public meetings and input create a unified vision and voice

Throughout the recovery process, there were numerous outreach methods and opportunities for the public to give direct input and take ownership of the recovery process. Starting with the focus groups of key community leadership, and continuing through numerous public meetings that were widely advertised and attended, there was emphasis throughout the recovery to include as many citizen voices as possible. The

⁸ Timeline courtesy of Devin Howland, Faulkner County Local Disaster Recovery Manager.

LDRM worked with steering committees, FEMA, EDA, and the universities to gather public input from various sources:

- Rebuild Vilonia and the Mayflower steering committee held numerous town hall-style gatherings.
- The LDRM staff canvassed the town, interviewing people to better understand what and how they wanted to see the cities recover.
- Feedback forms were made available to the public to capture comments.
- City websites hosted online methods to comment.
- A one page S.W.O.T. analysis was handed out for residents to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with this process.
- Mayflower conducted a meeting with one of the schools to gather input from the students, which was one of the liveliest meetings held. “We have to go to Conway or Little Rock to go to the movies,” said Trey White, a sophomore at Mayflower High School. “We want to spend our money here, but there’s nowhere to put it.”⁹

National Association of Development Organizations (NADO)

CPCB RSF engaged the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), a national organization providing advocacy, education, research and training for the nation’s network of regional development organizations. The goal was for NADO to host a training session for the LDRM, steering committees and others.

NADO hosted a national disaster recovery workshop in Little Rock, Arkansas, on November 18 and 19.¹⁰ The workshop brought together a national network of subject matter experts to share best practices and facilitate peer-to-peer learning activities centered on disaster planning and recovery. These experts were able to give advice and counsel to the local groups on next steps and implementation strategies.

University of Central Arkansas’ Center for Community and Economic Development (UCA-CCED), Arkadelphia Tour

The CPCB RSF and Economic RSF, through EDA, engaged the University of Central Arkansas’ Center for Community and Economic Development (UCA/CCED) about working with Mayflower and Vilonia. The University became an invested and active participant by hosting a tour of Arkadelphia, a city that had recovered from a tornado in 1997. Particularly, Arkadelphia created a recovery plan and developed a Community Development Organization (CDO) to steer rebuilding efforts. These efforts were discussed at length during the day long tour and workshop.

Amy Whitehead, Director of UCA/CCED, on the success of this initiative, “At least one community is discussing the formation of a CDO at the local level. By benchmarking against another community that had been through disaster recovery, the local citizens and leaders realized that an informal citizen organization would not be sustainable for long term development initiatives.”

⁹ “Mayflower students sound off on recovery planning” The Cabin. <http://thecabin.net/news/2015-04-25/mayflower-students-sound-recovery-planning>)

¹⁰ <http://www.nado.org/workshop-materials-now-available-from-lessons-from-the-storm-building-and-rebuilding-strong-sustainable-and-disaster-resilient-communities/>

University of Arkansas Fayetteville Community Design Center

The mission of the University of Arkansas Community Design Center is to advance creative development in Arkansas through education, research, and design solutions that enhance the physical environment of communities.

CAPDD contracted with the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's Community Design Center (UACDC) to develop new urban designs for Mayflower and Vilonia.¹¹ The designs were created based on the vision, goals and projects gleaned through public input.¹²



Figure 4: A rendering from the Mayflower Town Center Plan.

Once the designs were created, another round of public meetings was held to show these visual images of what the cities could look like in the future and gather feedback from the community. The energy at these meetings was very upbeat and positive, many comments were along the lines of “who wouldn’t want to live here!” This was one of the times where community members openly talked about the “opportunity” that was now available to them, and they allowed themselves a new way to look at the disaster.

“We’re really looking at changing Vilonia up, and I think it’s all for the better,” Mayor Firestone said. “It was one of those things that probably our city would have never headed in this direction. The tornado came — it really left a mark. It changed our lives out there, but it gave us the opportunity; this is what we were handed. We’re looking at making our city a better place to live.”¹³

Zoning that supports Creative Development

Zoning ordinances in both cities needed to be updated to enable the cities to implement the design concepts. Existing zoning would have been both too restrictive and too permissive to ensure consistency and enable the mixed use development called for in the recovery plans. Metroplan, the Metropolitan Planning Organization which serves Faulkner County, was approached to assist in the effort.

Metroplan was in the last phase of a Partnership for Sustainable Communities¹⁴ grant project called “JumpStart.”¹⁵ Through the Jumpstart program, five communities had received individual consultant-led planning assistance to build specific redevelopment plans that included market analyses, form based development codes, and guidance on infrastructure investments. Jumpstart’s focus was on development patterns featuring higher densities, mixed uses (commercial, residential and retail) and containing a variety of housing choices in a range of price points to be both commercially successful and environmentally sustainable.

This was a perfect fit for the needs in Vilonia and Mayflower. Metroplan was able to extend part of their grant to both communities and use the same contractors that had done all the previous work (Gateway). However,

¹¹ Faulkner County Arkansas Resilience: <http://www.faulknerarresilience.org/index.php/recovery-documents-publications>

¹² University of Arkansas Community Design Center: <http://uacdc.uark.edu/work/2015/5/19/building-arkansas-best-street>

¹³ “Vilonia 2030 includes new town center.” River Valley & Ozark.

<http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2015/apr/26/vilonia-2030-includes-new-town-center/?f=rivervalley>.

¹⁴ The Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC) works to coordinate federal housing, transportation, water, and other infrastructure investments to make neighborhoods more prosperous, allow people to live closer to jobs, save households time and money, and reduce pollution (<https://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/>).

¹⁵ Metroplan Central Arkansas: <http://www.gatewayplanning.com/code.php?page=200>

additional funding for this process was needed. CPCB RSF, working with its support agencies EPA and HUD through the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, facilitated identification of the grant extension and identify additional resources. Generous donations/grants were given by the Arkansas Community Foundation, the National Association of Development Organizations, the EDA and the University of Central Arkansas to fully fund this project.

Building Economic Development Capacity

Throughout the stakeholder focus group meetings, the issue cited as most critical to a successful recovery was building capacity for future economic development. This led to several initiatives, including a benchmarking tour of Arkadelphia, Arkansas and an Economic Development Boot Camp, among others.

UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development hosted an economic development boot camp for Faulkner County elected officials and city employees.¹⁶ The boot camp featured training sessions and planning simulations presented by community and economic development professionals. The boot camp was free of charge and was hosted as part of UCA's continued support for tornado recovery efforts in Faulkner County. A large number of participants attended from the impacted communities of Mayflower and Vilonia.

Amy Whitehead, Director of UCA's Community Development Institute (CDI) states, "When it comes to long-term recovery, anchor organizations are critical for success. Identify who these anchor organizations are on the front end, and include them in the recovery process as early as possible. The federal government is great at collecting data, developing reports and recommendations, and coordinating complex issues. However, you have to set communities up for success when the federal government leaves. It will be those anchor organizations that can help translate the data and recommendations in to action. Otherwise, local capacity will be overwhelmed and communities will default back to old ways of conducting business that is isolated from any of the lessons learned during the recovery period."

The CDI committed to continuing their economic development support by working with Vilonia on creating a brand for the town that would help drive marketing to outside entities, and define the community's sense of self.

In addition to the work the University was undertaking, the Arkansas Economic Development Commission committed to training the local communities on how to make themselves marketable to outside business and industry.

Building the Foundation for the Future/Mayflower's Recovery Plan

Mayor Randy Holland, the steering committee, the LDRM and others were able to deliver Mayflower's recovery plan at the one year anniversary of the tornado. The plan looks to the future and builds the foundation of where and what the citizens of Mayflower want their community to be. It identifies issues/challenges, opportunities, goals, and projects, to push Mayflower forward. It leverages the designs created by UA/CDC and the zoning created by Metroplan giving concrete next steps to fulfill the vision and goals set forth by the community.¹⁷

¹⁶ UCA Center for Community and Economic Development:

<http://uca.edu/cced/2015/05/11/faulkner-county-economic-development-boot-camp/>

¹⁷ Faulkner County Arkansas Resilience: <http://www.faulknerarresilience.org/index.php/recovery-documents-publications>

Building the Foundation for the Future/Vilonia's Recovery Plan

On Monday, April 27, 2015, Vilonia citizens came together to celebrate recovery and recognize those who lost their lives that terrible day in 2014. During this ceremony, the Vilonia 2030 Plan was officially adopted. The Plan is the product of many hours of volunteer work by Vilonia citizens and was completed with the assistance of partners at the local, county, State and Federal levels of government. The goal of the Plan is to provide the city with a list of specific projects based on input from city residents. The projects are developed and ranked in order of priority, giving the city a guide to use in recovering from the storms and redeveloping the city.¹⁸

Conclusion

This process depended on individuals that were willing to engage and get personally involved. No one person or agency had all the answers, there were starts and stops, roadblocks and successes. The steps taken by these cities are straightforward and build upon lessons learned in other communities. The two cities are well-positioned for the future with detailed next steps, designs, zoning and codes, increased capacity and relationships with active funders. CPCB RSF put this case study forward as a reference for other cities and organizations that are looking for clarity within the chaos of a disaster.

¹⁸ Faulkner County Arkansas Resilience: <http://www.faulknerarresilience.org/index.php/recovery-documents-publications>