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Albuquerque a leader in emergency preparedness

By Allan Bonner / Author, "safer Cities of the Future"

An emergency is not an emergency for responders. EMS, fire, police and others respond to emergencies for a living. For them, a fire, an explosion, a spill or a crash is just another day at the office.

But sometimes responders become victims, too.

Snipers targeted firefighters in Detroit in the riots of the 1960s. Terrorists sometimes set off a small bomb to force people into a stampede, or to drive responders into a vulnerable spot where a larger bomb goes off.

All emergency planners should be mindful of this. Unfortunately it's not in most of the 100 city emergency plans that I recently studied.

But there's a quick and clear reality check in Albuquerque's emergency planning documents:

"Our food distribution system could be visualized as a Weapon of Mass Destruction."

As soon as you hear this simple sentence, you immediately realize the havoc a terrorist could cause by contaminating a city's water supply, nearby factory farms, or the food distribution system. Even spreading ordinary influenza could disable millions of people, if only for a few days.

What about just delaying the distribution of food with an attack on trucking or trains? Boston estimates the city has about 3.5 days of food on hand at a given time. Most cities are probably in the same situation. Just-in-time delivery creates a vulnerability that can hit us all.

Albuquerque highlights an important security issue, which other cities don't even mention.

Some cities' plans note that donations of food may overwhelm people trying to handle them, and be far more than what people need. Other cities leave this up to the Red Cross and other volunteer groups. But no city notes as prominently as Albuquerque how this may be a life and death issue.

Why aren't this and other life-threatening issues higher up on the priority list for cities?

It may be because emergency preparedness has no political constituency. Who would win on a promise of being able to evacuate their city faster than their opponent, or of making the city transit system use electric, gasoline, and diesel vehicles just in case there's a shortage of fuel?

Too many urban emergency plans contain pages of jargon, definitions, roles, responsibilities, the names of civic boosters who contributed, blank pages, lists of critical facilities needing repair, projects that need funding, and so on. None of this keeps anybody any safer and it's really a diversion from building safer cities.

But a few lines from Albuquerque's 2014 Hazard Mitigation Plan show us the way.

The "benefits of mitigation planning go beyond solely reducing hazard vulnerability. Related measures emanating from mitigation plan such as preserving open space, protecting vital

infrastructure, designing sustainable buildings, maintaining environmental health, and protecting critical facilities meet other important community objectives including public safety, natural resource protection, and business development.”

Good, open space with modern drainage and landscaping benefits everyone. Apart from recreational use, this space might help prevent flooding.

Transport systems that use electricity, diesel fuel and gasoline won't get disabled if there's a power outage or a shortage of one type of fuel. Earthquake-proof buildings don't have to be rebuilt after a quake.

Good environmental health in a city means trees, fresh water pipes that don't leak, as well as recycling, and more. This translates into less pollution, less absenteeism at work, and more productivity. Facilities that fail at a critical

moment mean the power goes off to hospitals, buses can't transport health care workers to the sick, and police and fire can't respond.

A safer, more livable city is its own reward. With just a little thought, this more livable city will save money for taxpayers, create jobs, and make money for businesses.

Albuquerque has shown the way to get politicians and citizens interested in surrogate issues that will end up saving lives in an emergency.

In the meantime, we'll just live in a cleaner, more prosperous and safer city.

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