



# Polk County

## Post Disaster Redevelopment Plan

### Case Study

#### Background

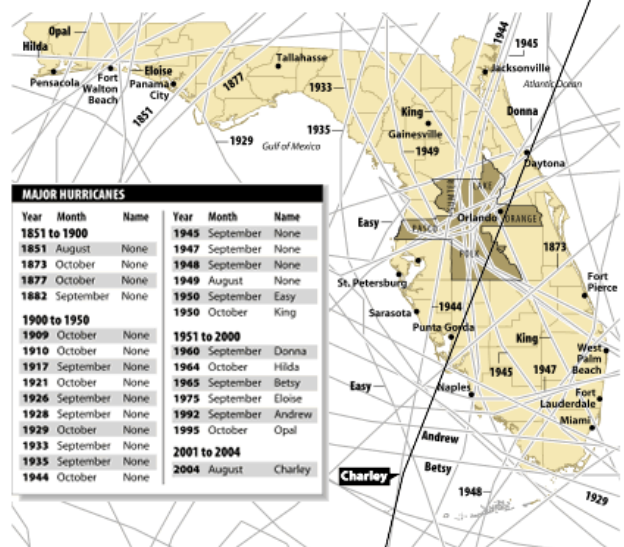
Polk County has several features that distinguish it from other pilot communities that were selected for Phase II of the Post Disaster Redevelopment Plan pilot initiative. Located between the two major urban areas of Orlando and Tampa, the County was the only inland county chosen to participate in the pilot. Not only is the County an inland county, but approximately 40% of its area is designated a 100-year flood hazard and contains headwaters to six of Florida's rivers. The county is home to numerous important ecologically sensitive areas such as the Green Swamp, the Lake Wales Ridge, and designated environmental areas through the County's Environmental Lands Program. Since outdoor recreation is a major variable in attracting visitors to the area, environmental preservation and restoration following a disaster is of major importance.

The County is situated between Orlando and Tampa and is traversed by Interstate 4, which connects these two urban areas. Even if Polk County is not directly impacted by a disaster, an incident in either one of these two large metropolitan areas is likely to have a significant impact on housing, the economy, government services, the environment, health and human services, and infrastructure. Polk County has the geographic space, infrastructure, and transportation linkages necessary to provide host services to displaced survivors from both of these areas if devastated by a disaster. The county leadership recognizes hosting a large number of the displaced neighbors could significantly alter the social, economic, and political environmental of the county.

**Figure 1: Major Hurricane Paths**

#### Tracking the paths

A look at all of the major hurricanes (category 3 and higher) that have passed through Florida since 1851.



Polk County and the areas immediately surrounding it have been impacted by numerous major hurricanes as depicted in Figure 1. However, other hazards also pose a risk to the County which has received 9 Presidential Disaster declarations since 1998, not all of which have resulted from hurricanes.

The County is a home rule charter county and includes 17 municipal jurisdictions, with the largest city being Lakeland, as well as numerous unincorporated, census-designated communities. This large number of municipal jurisdictions is a further unique characteristic of Polk County among the pilot communities. When developing a jurisdictions wide plan, policies, and procedures, a large number of independent municipal jurisdictions may pose challenges not realized by communities with few independent jurisdictions, elected officials, and municipal charters.

The overall population of the county is slightly over a half million. Historically, the primary industries have been citrus, cattle, and phosphate mining. However, in recent years, the health care industry has also become a major contributor to the local economy. Tourism is also a strong economic force in the county due to its close proximity to Orlando and Tampa as well as the County's own unique attractions such as major sports and outdoor recreation.

An analysis of structures in Polk County revealed that a majority (66%) were built prior to 1994 making them the most vulnerable to wind damage. Another 14% were built from 1994 to 2001 and are considered moderately vulnerable to wind damage. This means that 80% of all structures in the county are moderately to highly vulnerable to wind damage. Further analysis revealed that Polk County is home to 500 mobile home (containing nearly 46,000 spaces).

## Unique Planning Considerations

### Municipal Involvement

The project incorporated six large scale meetings with stakeholders groups, numerous smaller one on one coordination meetings and stakeholder conference calls with discipline specific members. Using meeting time efficiently and effectively for a large county with many jurisdictions was a challenge both in terms of geographic location and space. The large scale meeting format consisted of a short plenary session with brief project overview, then breakout by six discipline specific workgroups for approximately two hours. Following these focused discussions, the workgroups would reconvene, and a spokesperson from each workgroup would highlight important points from the assigned discussion topics.

Based upon the project goals, the plan criteria, and current issues, the project leadership developed a series of structured questions for each of the discipline specific workgroups. These leading questions provided sufficient opportunity for groups explore disaster ramifications, identify policy concerns, focus on political priorities, acknowledge resource shortfalls, and generate interdisciplinary issues. This meeting structure was perceived as effective in not producing a large quantity of information for inclusion in the plan, and also in generating cross discussion of information and ideas between the workgroups. This format also seemed to keep participants engaged by preventing exclusion of key individuals and/or disciplines in the discussion and findings.



However, due to project timeline and resource restrictions, the stakeholder engagement process faced ultimate limitations. Exacerbated by the size of the county and the large number of independent municipal jurisdictions, the planning process was limited to the involvement of the larger municipal jurisdictions. The medium and smaller municipalities, though invited, did not send ongoing representation to the planning sessions. Even for those municipal jurisdictions committed to participate, they lacked sufficient staffing to engage with each discipline specific workgroup potentially affecting their jurisdiction.

Also, the jurisdictional authority of the plan over cities was not clear which may have also been a factor in deciding the level of involvement by city officials. Many governments are facing budget and personnel shortfalls and must prioritize the commitments of their staff. If there was no perceived mandate, participation will become secondary to issues that have regulatory, legal or high-value political ramifications. Voluntary programs, regardless of how beneficial they are, will always be overshadowed by those that are not. Some cities may even perceive the PDRP as threatening since they consider it a county document with potential unfunded mandates for pre disaster action and post disaster policy guidance.

This challenge was recognized by the Land Use Workgroup and they determined that an interjurisdictional land planners' sub-workgroup was needed in order to implement the PDRP over the long term with regard to land use issues. For example, the issue of how to manage non-conforming uses that have been damaged following a disaster resulted in divergent opinions. Similar methodologies are recommended for several other workgroup areas such as Government Operations, Infrastructure, and Building and Housing. The issues that are facing these workgroups will require collaboration and consensus between the cities and the county.

The Executive Committee also recognized the need for greater municipal involvement, representation, and overall buy-in. As part of their long-term implementation of the PDRP, the Executive Committee will be developing a formalized plan for communicating with the cities. One approach that is being considered is working with the cities on an "issue by issue" basis, i.e. County Public Works Director working with City Public Works Directors, which has been effective in the past. It was suggested by the Deputy County Manager, Jim Freeman, that working through the local chapter of City Managers as well as the Ridge League of Cities would provide mechanisms for communicating and liaising with the Cities to: 1) dispel any misconceptions about the PDRP, and 2) promote participation and buy-in. It was also recommended that the structure of the Executive Committee be modified to include a municipal representative, although at the time, it is not clear what criteria would be used to select this representative.

### Location of County

Despite the emphasis on all-hazard planning, most people in Florida typically consider "disaster" synonymous with "hurricane." While hurricanes are the biggest threat in terms of widespread, catastrophic disaster, other hazards can threaten the residents and economy of the County. Furthermore, even when considering hurricanes, most Floridians have been ingrained with the mindset that coastal counties are the ones



primarily at risk, since there is no risk of storm surge for inland counties such as Polk. Other misconceptions also exacerbate lackadaisical thinking such as the belief that they will not experience catastrophic winds because hurricanes will weaken by the time they reach inland counties.

As a result, establishing support, by residents, county officials, and political leadership was a challenge, particularly since many were in the area in 2004 when the county was impacted by several hurricanes. Understandably, they initially framed their thinking for this project based on past experience. To overcome this way of thinking, we modeled a plausible scenario using HAZUS to provide credible impact data. This information was presented to the Committee members as well as used during the public workshops and was found to be very effective. In fact, it was the opinion of the Committee that continuing to use this type of data in further outreach is necessary to making the public understand the long-term nature of the plan's purpose.

Although the project initially incorporated only one public workshop, the project leadership expanded to a total of three workshops due to Polk County's large geographic size. In order to encourage attendance, workshops were strategically located in the areas of the county that contained the 3 highest densities of population. Workshop attendance improved with each meeting with a total of 42 in attendance at the final meeting. The public workshop was conducted in a panelist format, with discipline specific workgroup chairpersons leading the discussion. However, one of the most notable observations was the level of sophistication in types of questions being asked and the level of engagement by the participants. For example, questions were related to land use changes, mitigation improvements in infrastructure to improved drainage and reduced flooding, economic redevelopment and resiliency, and ways to keep local government solvent. Discussion also included inquiries as to what was being done on the regional level with regard to long-term post disaster redevelopment since they clearly recognized that impacts to the Tampa area were likely to have impacts in Polk County both directly and indirectly. It was evident that they understood the long term nature and implications of the PDRP.

Each of the model communities selected various strategies for public engagement. Polk County chose to conduct their public outreach workshops fairly early in the planning process. The workgroup chairpersons that were selected to lead the discussion on the panel, were initially hesitant since specific plan elements and policy recommendations had not yet been developed. The obvious advantage, however, of this strategy is that the planning team members were able to hear the preferences of the community as well as policies which may be of concern prior to completing the plan. Community stakeholder engagement processes to often are a community stamp of approval after the plans have developed. The early engagement strategy was beneficial because local officials with subject matter expertise in the workgroup areas were chosen to present the issues germane to their respective areas and lead the subsequent discussion and field questions from the audience. In addition to providing more familiarity between panelists and residents, it also helped establish local ownership of the project by key stakeholders.



While it is entirely possible that Polk County could itself be a victim of a disaster, it is equally conceivable that, while it may not be directly impacted from a disaster, it could suffer an indirect crisis as a result of events that occur from neighboring, coastal counties. Evacuees from the Tampa area will cause a strain on housing, government services, health services, and infrastructure. As a result of this project, the existing Disaster Housing Plan was reviewed and found by the Building, Housing and Historic Preservation Workgroup to be insufficient both in terms of the county as directly impacted by an incident, or indirectly as a host county to long-term evacuees. The current plan was not developed in consultation with land use planners to ensure consistency with future land use designations.

As a result, it was determined that the current plan requires significant updating and revision and that this process should include the Land Use/Environmental Workgroup. The Executive Committee does not want to identify and list specific locations for temporary housing. This decision was borne out of the county's experience after the 2004 hurricane season in which they felt pressured by the State and FEMA to give them lists of sites selected for temporary housing. It was their opinion that in giving them such a list, the county would ultimately relinquish control over the establishment of temporary housing placement. Rather, as part of the long-term implementation the PDRP (and included as an Action Matrix item), they prefer to establish site criteria through a collaborative effort between the Building, Housing and Historic Preservation and Land Use/Environmental Workgroups. Rather, the plan should be revised to include suitable parameters to which potential sites can be compared to determine suitability. It is their opinion that by choosing this option that the County is not "locked in" to committing certain locations to the State and FEMA, especially if they find themselves in the position of being a host county. The Workgroup further recognized that other partnerships such as the local chapter of the Institute of Real Estate Management that could provide potential resources also need to be incorporated into the new Disaster Housing Plan. These recommendations were addressed in detail in the Institutional Capacity Chapter as well as the Action Matrix of the PDRP.

#### Level of Plan Acceptance

Throughout the project, there were varying degrees of participation and acceptance of the importance of the PDRP. This was largely in part as a result of the "ad hoc" workgroup attendance. No formal PDRP Executive Committee or workgroup chair persons were selected until the end of November. Consequently, until that time there was limited involvement by those with decision-making authority with regard to suggestions about policy changes, revisions, etc. Furthermore, the lack of consistent attendance resulted in "re-kicking off" the project due to lack of previous project background and discussion.

Greater acceptance of the plan and more involvement by county leadership was noted in January 2009 once workgroup chairperson assignments were established by the Deputy County Manager which created greater accountability. The third of four contractual planning sessions was held in January of 2009. This was the first meeting for several of the attendees since the inception of the project. Consequently, the County requested an extension in order to have more time to review draft sections of



the plan that had been developed to date by the contractor since the original deadline for project completion was March 24<sup>th</sup>. They also wished to continue discussion and development of items for the Action Matrix and implementation timeframe deadlines.

By the conclusion of the pilot, there was general acceptance of the plan by all workgroups, though varying levels of active support still existed. Although the plan was ultimately adopted by the Board of County Commissioners, no budgetary commitments are planned for ongoing implementation of the plan. Budgetary needs notwithstanding, many of the actions listed in the Action Matrix require in-house staff time, which may be equally as difficult commit resources to.

### Budget Process and Continued Implementation

Polk County has adopted a budget process that is highly dependent upon public input and support of programs. Based on the principles from the book, “The Price of Government,” the County has implemented Budgeting for Outcomes. In this process, citizen input factors heavily into desired community outcomes. A list of priorities for achieving these outcomes is then developed, and through a collaborative effort between the citizens and the government, programs that are determined to achieve outcomes are “purchased” (i.e. selected to receive budget funds).

This process will have implications for continued support and funding of PDRP initiatives and completion of the actionable items identified in the process for continued implementation of the plan. Impressing the importance of this plan on the public will be critical. This can be a challenge since it is difficult to convince the public to allocate resources to a program that deals with an incident they believe is very unlikely to occur – a catastrophic disaster. However, by continuing to integrate PDRP into other existing programs, plans, and visioning processes with which they are more familiar, PDRP efforts can continue to grow and develop through the ongoing development of these ancillary efforts that indirectly support PDRP.

### **The PDRP Process and Result**

Overall, the process for this pilot appeared to be well received and an effective use of time. Feedback on the format of the strategic planning sessions as described earlier was positive. These sessions were augmented by conference calls, individual telephone calls, and email exchange with the Pilot Coordinator, Executive Committee Members, and other project participants.

The majority of the feedback from participants focused on municipal involvement and authority. The Executive Committee felt that if regulatory requirements for PDRP are going to be expanded, greater clarification is needed with regard to integration of the cities. This is particularly important for counties like Polk with a high number of municipalities, some of which are large such as Lakeland. For example, it was suggested by the Executive Committee that if PDRP is to be a requirement for the county, it should also be a requirement for the cities, perhaps similar to the requirement of cities to adopt LMS.



The outcome of the process was a plan that was more strategic in nature than tactical or operational. This evolution was likely the result of the realization of underlying planning and policy issues requiring further development or refinement. This includes more collaborative planning efforts between workgroup areas for issues that will have multiple impacts in various areas, such as temporary housing and land use, as previously discussed. The Committee also realized that policies and ordinances that establish authority are needed before more operational procedures can be developed.

Typically one of the aspects of PDRP addresses how changes can be implemented to mitigate against future risk through land use and building decisions. Polk has been heavily engaged in long-term visioning efforts in such areas as transportation, land use, and economic development that already address many of these issues. What became apparent during the process was the ability to bridge the period following a disaster to implementing the long-term development goals already articulated in these visioning tools. Much of this will require the establishment of policies and ordinances that provide a way for the county to bridge this period.

In June 2009, the completed plan was presented to the Board of County Commissioners. The Pilot Coordinator utilized the HAZUS data that was developed during the course of the project to impress upon them the magnitude of the incident and timeframe that post disaster redevelopment encompasses. During this presentation, the Pilot Coordinator provided an overview of the Action Matrix and a summary of the timeline for implementation. At the conclusion of the presentation, the Board unanimously voted to adopt the plan and support its future implementation.

