



Panel offers blueprint for surviving next Sandy

The group offers 23 recommendations ranging from discouraging development of the most vulnerable properties to resurrecting the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, created by President Barack Obama in December, as a permanent body to keep conversations about resiliency alive and in the public eye.

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Nearly a year after Superstorm Sandy, a report released by the Urban Land Institute Wednesday provides a blueprint for how homeowners, real estate developers and most importantly government agencies can mitigate damage from the next natural disaster. A panel of experts also said they believe that the city's impending change in leadership is the perfect time to make broad policy changes.

"I think we actually have a good opportunity to start carrying this forward with a brand-new administration, with fresh eyes on this, and hopefully to a large extent carry on the planning that has been done," said John McIlwain, who chairs the housing group at the Washington D.C.-based institute. The panel of experts, which was put together by ULI after Sandy, provides 23 specific recommendations to make the New York area more resistant to storm damage.

Among other things the report urges greater coordination between federal, state and local governments. But it also got very specific on topics including land use, including ways to rethink risk categories in coastal regions. The panel recommends that government identify the highest-risk properties and begin to discourage new development there by decreasing subsidies to existing homeowners, and increasing opportunities for buyouts. Panelist William Lashbrook, a senior vice president at PNC Bank, stressed the idea of giving homeowners options. One possibility would be to offer homeowners a life-estate option for those who don't want to take a buyout of their home. In that scenario, the government could help pay for necessary repairs in return for the owner agreeing to turn the property over to the state upon their death.

Panel members also stressed the need to plan for failure. Byron Stigge, director of consultants Level Infrastructure cited the example of two electrical substations located in the city and how they were managed during the storm. He noted that a substation in Manhattan was left running when it was inundated by the storm surge and it failed catastrophically, causing a days-long power outage in much of lower Manhattan.

On the other hand, a substation in Brooklyn was shut off before being flooded, and afterward switched back on without an extended blackout, according to Mr. Stigge.

Since panelists identified short political cycles and tight budgets as one of the biggest obstacles to implementing long-term policy and infrastructure changes, they recommended resurrecting the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, created by President Barack Obama in December, and making it a permanent fixture to keep conversations about resiliency alive and in the public eye.

Some of that has been working already, according to Kristina Ford, a panelist and professor at Columbia University. She said she spoke with a New York area residential developer who compared the drive to design storm resistant buildings to the drive for green buildings years ago. In the beginning the energy-saving LEED standard was not popular with builders, but as the idea gained popularity with buyers and tenants, the real estate industry delivered.

The institute's report is not the first to recommend ways to increase the city's resiliency. About 20 reports, including a comprehensive document issued by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's office, have been released in the wake of the storm.