

Prepared Statement of
The Honorable Patricia A. Owens
Former Mayor
Grand Forks, North Dakota

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
September 14, 2005

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Lieberman, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. The catastrophic disaster that Katrina caused to Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama brought back many memories of the '97 disaster in my home city of Grand Forks, ND.

In April 1997, the raging Red River of the North spawned the "flood of the Century", a 210 year event, and forced the evacuation of nearly all the city's 52,000 population. Amid the flood waters, 11 buildings in the heart of downtown burned. We had no water, no sewage system, no electricity and very limited communication systems for several weeks. The flood waters covering our city were rushing through our city with dangerous force, freezing cold and very toxic. Many of our people scattered around the country to 49 of the 50 states. Other evacuees were housed in a hangar at the Grand Forks Air Force Base. The University of North Dakota offered their facilities for our Emergency Center when it too went under water, the use of their news center for daily news conferences and housing for displaced residents.

Blizzards, massive flooding, fire . . . it was an unforgettable season of disaster for Grand Forks, North Dakota. When it was over, nearly 90 percent of the city had flooded, the downtown was a shadow of its former self and there was extensive property damage and destruction. With the infrastructure, schools, neighborhoods, businesses and sense of community destroyed, how does a whole city sturdy itself and come back even stronger? Though we thought we had been through the worst of it, the city would now face its biggest challenge yet - rebuilding.

President Clinton, accompanied by cabinet members, our ND Senators, Congressman and Governor, came to our city on April 22 and met with officials. He also addressed the large crowd of citizens that were housed at the Grand Forks Air Force Base. The promise he made was that the government would stand beside us and assist us in our recovery efforts. We lobbied long and hard and were fortunate to have received Federal and State funds to be used toward our recovery efforts. The nation responded with immediate assistance for our people. These monies and support not only gave elected and community leaders the strength, courage and motivation to tackle the enormous task of rebuilding a city suffering from such mass destruction, but it also gave us an opportunity to creatively build our city back better than ever.

Now the question I had in my mind was where do we start to rebuild? People's lives were turned upside down. How do we get our people back, and, if they do come back, how do we help them

to physically, mentally and financially face the task of rebuilding their lives? How do we help them begin to return to some form of normalcy in their lives? Their place of employment either no longer existed or were closed altogether. There were no daycare centers, no schools, no churches. Most were either destroyed or damaged severely. What we in Grand Forks did was roll up our sleeves, organize, work hard and believe that we could create a future for our citizens.

Rebuilding had to start with delegating responsibility and communication. First of all, we had to get our local government back and organized to start the planning process. As Mayor, I appointed a tri-chair group to assist in the Mayor and Council efforts. It consisted of my Director of Public Works/City Engineer, Community Development Director and City Auditor. No Mayor can possibly have all the technical knowledge required to run a city much less to rebuild one. They assisted me, followed me, and advised me on all issues that arose during our rebuilding process. We had 14 City Council members. I recommended forming a flood response committee consisting of 5 of those members. We met daily. They were my advocates in setting up citizen committees to head up and address the various avenues we needed to even get started.

My City Attorney became invaluable in the recovery process. He worked with the State to filter out the questionable contractors that come forth to rebuild the city. He kept on top of all the legal issues such as gouging the people when they came back to repair their homes and businesses. We needed to get our tax base back. I appointed a group of local business people to work with our Community Development Director to start that process.

Our Director of Public Works/City Engineer's first task was to get our water plant up and running and address the issue of the destroyed infrastructure. He also continued to work with the Mayor and City Council on a permanent flood protection project for the future. Without this project as a promise for protection in the future, people were not interested in coming back with the possibility of experiencing the same disaster again in the future. Eight years later, this project is almost completed.

We were not afraid to get expertise from consultants as rebuilding from the ground up was all new to every one of us. We hired a firm to help put a workable plan in place. Some areas of our city were going downhill prior to the flood/fire such as the downtown. These consultants helped us to put plans in place that would bring us back much stronger. We were not afraid to make changes such as tearing down an enclosure for a downtown mall that had been struggling. It was opened up with new store fronts, a town square and a greenway that attracts tourists and serves as a gathering center for the farmers market, concerts. etc.

We, City government, immediately started having planning sessions with the other governmental bodies in the city i.e. the Park Board, Schools and the County. We worked together every step of the way to bring back our city's tax base.

Housing was a concern. It was decided to build 200 affordable homes and give incentives to those that wished to purchase them. This was very controversial but has turned out be one of the best decisions that was made.

Our Senators and Congressman were great advisors and leaders for our local government in the rebuilding efforts. I worked right along side them in Washington, D.C. in lobbying efforts and efforts to bring the message to the President and Congress of our on-going needs necessary for recovery.

Grand Forks has come back bigger, better and stronger than it was prior to the disaster. This has not been without obstacles every step of the way. Elected people need to be personally strong as people get angry over their lives being turned upside down and tend to pass the blame on to anyone that is out-front. Cities need to set up a structure in their recovery process that addresses psychological issues such as depression, anger, alcoholism, drug abuse, etc. These problems get worse as time goes on.

Eight years have come and gone since the flood of 1997. The lives of those involved will never be the same. Many moved to new neighborhoods; many never returned. It is an event that had a permanent impact on Grand Forks' citizens. We were forced to evacuate, leaving our homes and all our material possessions at the fate of the flood. We in Grand Forks were fortunate as we lost no lives in the flood and fire. Ours was bad; Katrina was catastrophic.

After my term in office as Mayor ended, I was hired by FEMA as an Ambassador of Hope and consultant to other cities experiencing disasters. Communities and their elected people need a support base when bad things happen. They need to know that it will take a long time to recover but that it can be done with determination and hard work. The key to recovery is communication and organization in setting the future vision of the city.

When we were going through this disaster and survival/recovery efforts, there were constant obstacles in the way. In times of disaster, one sees the best and the worst in people. Everyone is running on adrenaline for days, weeks, months and they eventually get very tired. Emotions run rampant. Elected individuals need to instill in people that they can recover but it takes time . . . a lot of time.

The groundwork that was laid in our survival and recovery efforts is accomplishing our vision and goals for the residents of that city. We are seeing eight years later the positive results of everybody's dedication and hard work. As I stated many times over during our turmoil, "we will rebuild and we will come back bigger, better, stronger." Today this is happening.

My message to those affected by Katrina is to form partnerships among citizens, community leaders, businesses and city, state and federal agencies. Team work pays off for everyone involved. Recovery is difficult and sometimes very cruel, but your continued strong faith, hope and determination will reap rewards as you move through recovery. Together you can do it!

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia A. Owens

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