

# Lessons Learned

## Grand Forks 1997 Flood Recovery

A flood of epic proportions, like the one Grand Forks experienced in April 1997, has yielded many important lessons about how to recover from a major disaster.



Photo By: Berniece Bohlman

Perhaps the most important lesson learned is that local leadership sets the course for recovery and that it takes the efforts of many people – citizens, business owners, elected officials, government partners, volunteers and disaster-relief workers – to successfully bring a community back.

Disaster recovery is neither quick nor easy. It presents many challenges. It also presents many opportunities. If a community can learn to re-imagine itself and to embrace change, it can do more than recover. It can thrive and offer the promise of a future that better protects it from the tragedy of the past.

The following are both proven successes and lessons learned throughout Grand Forks' journey of flood recovery:

- Successful disaster management results from good advance planning, training and partnership building, honest, ongoing communication and the ability to work through issues as a team.
- Understand that information is as essential to basic needs as food and water.
- Ask for help and utilize as much of it as you can.
- Be aware that attitudes of local leaders set the tone for the disaster – both internally and externally. Leaders who appear strong, calm and reassuring send the message that the emergency can be managed and that the community will survive.
- Recognize that you can't please everyone.
- Set realistic expectations of what government can and cannot do for its citizens. On any level, it cannot make people whole.
- Establish a strong public information operation to ensure that clear, concise and pertinent information is being released, and to help manage the demands of the media (i.e. information, access to disaster area, interviews with key officials, etc.)
- Understand that internal communication among emergency workers is just as critical as external communication is to the general public. Develop a system to keep your emergency team informed.
- Be flexible and innovative in managing the emergency itself. The ability to change course as needed helps ensure the overall success of the operation.
- Recognize your physical and emotional limits. Burnout is common on large and/or extended disasters. Enlist professional help in monitoring internal morale and responding to signs of critical incident stress.
- Create an efficient method to collect, store & distribute donated goods.
- Conduct an after-action review to determine what went right and wrong. Adjust future disaster-response plans accordingly.
- Re-establish local government and essential services (public safety, community health care, etc.) as quickly as possible.
- Consider using temporary staffing, if needed, to get government up and running.
- Realize that recovery from a catastrophic disaster will take years. From the start, adopt a long-range view for your decision-making and stick with it throughout the process.
- Develop both short-term and long-term recovery plans. Be willing to enlist the help of outside experts if needed.
- Maintain a sense of right and wrong.
- Manage expectations. Be realistic in what you can accomplish in a day, a week, a month.
- Provide hope and positive messages whenever possible.
- Say "Thank You" along the way.
- Understand that local leaders will have to make many tough decisions during both short- and long-term recovery. Govern with the goal of doing what is right for the community-at-large, even if it may mean personal political peril.
- Appoint a recovery chief or liaison to interface with state and federal disaster recovery agencies.
- Set up leadership teams to help guide key recovery components such as temporary and permanent housing, business redevelopment and establishing public-private partnerships.
- Create innovative ways to quickly restore your local tax base.
- Establish a line of credit for local government to provide cash flow for paying bills and for initiating governmental repairs/rebuilding.
- Require licensing of contractors and transient merchants – including bonding, criminal background checks and photo identification – to help safeguard people from "fly-by-night" operations.
- Provide functional daycare if private industry cannot, to help citizens return to their jobs more quickly (which ultimately leads to a quicker business-sector recovery).
- Understand that people deal with disasters differently and that most people will not be at a given stage at the same time. Be prepared to help them process information and make decisions more than once.
- Practice patience. Some things just take time.
- Resist the temptation to forgo local building codes and floodplain ordinances during the rebuilding process. The community's long-term health and safety is at stake.
- Actively mitigate public and private structures whenever possible to minimize the effects of future disasters.
- Understand that the "new normal" will never mirror the pre-disaster image. Instead, think outside the box. Be open to creating a new look for your community rather than trying to regain only what was lost.
- Encourage historic preservation whenever possible.
- Document all spending – carefully! Be prepared to detail governmental purchases and rebuilding projects.
- Leverage local, state and federal resources for infrastructure repair/ replacement.
- Use repairs and renovations as an economic development incentive.
- Learn from mistakes.
- Celebrate successes often to buoy morale and maintain focus on a positive long-term recovery.
- Keep the Faith. There is always light at the end of the tunnel.