



The Grantee Perspective: Achieving CDBG-DR Success

By Jane Brogan and Emily Thompson, Hill International

Communities recovering from disasters face many challenges: political pressures, compliance with funding sources and simply identifying the best path forward based on specific risks and opportunities. Thankfully, there are many qualified vendors and consultants to help plan and execute community recovery. However, decision-makers and stakeholders often face a thicket of competing promises and conflicting messages on what they need for their recovery and how best to design their program.

To achieve a holistic approach, community leaders should select partners who understand how to manage the risks they are likely to face and how to leverage the help in ways that match the community's needs and goals.

Qualities to look for in consultants and vendors include:

- **The Grantee Perspective.** The best partners bring an insider's view to help design and launch a recovery program—they've served as owners and know your needs and challenges firsthand. This perspective is invaluable in identifying unmet needs, aligning recovery funds with those needs and creating a program that works specifically for your community.

- **Full Life-Cycle Approach.** Choose vendors who can contribute from day one and who can guide your recovery from design through closeout. Understanding the risks your program is likely to encounter at each stage of recovery will mitigate delays and keep

restoration activities moving forward.

- **Agency Understanding.** The U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development provides flexible Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds to help cities, counties and states to recover. Be sure your consultants are fully versed in all elements of CDBG-DR HUD as well as state and local requirements.

There are no shortcuts when building back after a disaster. Leaders face both known and unknown risks, all while managing the immediate trauma and damage of the event itself. That's why it's important to select vendors and partners with experience as grantees, who can stand with you and guide your recovery. ♦

Rebirth of a Tourist Town Brings New Life to a Small City

Though local villagers call it “our little slice of Paradise,” the tiny city of Mexico Beach, Fla., was ravaged by Hurricane Michael in October 2018. “The eye of the storm devastated about 80% of the city's infrastructure,” says Erin Capps, a project director and emergency management market leader at AtkinsRéalis.

With an operating budget of about \$3 million, the town of less than 1,000 residents was ill-prepared to navigate the challenges that the hurricane devastation wrought. The solution arrived 10 days after the storm when the city hired AtkinsRéalis to provide disaster recovery services.

“We did it all,” says Capps, “including disaster recovery and grant and project management. We provided staff augmentation, coordinated debris cleanup, assisted with safety inspections, navigated FEMA programs and paperwork and cataloged the priorities

of which facilities needed to be repaired or replaced. We worked with national and state government agencies to obtain grants totaling more than \$100 million in recovery funding, and about \$90 million has already been distributed,” she says.

From the onset, AtkinsRéalis focused on a premise to build back better and that is evidenced in the planning that has led to repositioning key assets. For example, the city's former police and fire facilities were close to the water and proved highly vulnerable as the hurricane relentlessly pounded

the buildings and filled them with ocean debris and water.

Now, just over five years later, AtkinsRéalis has helped the city create a plan for rebuilding the Mexico Beach Police and Fire Municipal Complex in an area of low risk. Parks have been rebuilt and the tourists are again relaxing on the city's pristine beaches. “Tourists even comment how they can't believe that the city could rebuild so quickly,” Capps says. Mexico Beach exemplifies how a small community with big plans can transform from rubble to rebirth, resiliently, in just five years. ♦



Complicated clean-up continues after Hurricane Michael demolished much of Mexico Beach, Fla.

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