

REBUILDING OUR COMMUNITY: WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

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by

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**AN OCCASIONAL PAPER OF
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*COMMUNITY DECISION MAKING***

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life is a non-partisan, non-profit entity for the purpose of building infrastructure and habits of deliberative decision making.

“To think of politics as a public activity changes the very meaning of politics. Politics becomes the art of making productive relationships among diverse people rather than just passing legislation or electing representatives.”

—David Mathews, *Politics for People*

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Introduction

On April 27, 2011, numerous Alabama communities were struck by EF4 and EF5 tornadoes and high winds outside the paths of major funnels. Damage was widespread. Damage in direct paths of the tornadoes was catastrophic.

In some communities, swaths of storm damage extend for miles. Some neighborhoods and business districts were leveled. Others were severely damaged. Areas adjacent to the paths of major tornadoes suffered wind damage to trees, houses, mobile homes, businesses, and other structures.

Many communities will never look the same. Some communities will never be the same.

Volunteer and local government reactions were swift. Community members pulled together across all manner of previous differences. Storms literally blow down fences between people. Working together to meet immediate needs occurs quickly and spontaneously.

In a disaster, a community is much dependent on its own resources for the first seventy-two hours or so. People and organizations from across the country sent help quickly. Government agencies and organized relief organizations began to arrive.

Inevitable problems of coordination and distribution of goods and services occurred. Rescue, medical care, temporary shelter, food, and clothing were priorities. Many, many people worked through chaos to meet these priorities. They had a common purpose of relieving suffering.

As the first responses took hold, a second staged emerged. That stage continues. It involves the painful work of recovering the dead, clearing debris, making temporary repairs, and continuing to relocate and care for those in need. This stage involves more thoughtful and careful organization.

At the same time, another overlapping stage emerges. People begin thinking about plans for what will replace structures and ways of living. Many structures and many customary ways of doing things daily are either no longer there or are tremendously altered.

Another stage follows the initial planning. After the rebuilding begins, what will a rebuilt community look like, feel like, and be like? This is the stage, barring another disaster, in which residents and future generations will live.

In many communities, initial responses of concern and care were shining moments of community resilience. These responses often occurred across differences of opinions, lifestyles, religious beliefs, racial identities, and other factors.

A hard question remains for the future. Can the stage of putting a community back together match the outpouring of care across differences that occurred in immediate reaction to disaster?

Homeowners ask themselves if I move, where do I go? If I stay and rebuild, will my neighborhood be better or worse for me and my family? Renters ask can I afford what will be available where I want to live? Parents and relatives ask where will children and young people go to school?

Businesses ask where will traffic patterns be? What will be around me? How visible and accessible will my business be?

Citizens who don't live in affected areas wonder about the overall impact of redevelopment on historical character, economic development, environment, personal convenience, and aesthetic appeal.

Developers look for opportunities. Often, governmental and other institutional interventions are involved.

Questions abound. Necessary decisions abound.

Some communities wait on others to act. Some communities act.

What are their choices? What are your choices?

The central challenges are who gets to make decisions and how will they be made. Citizens must make hard choices among economic development, historic preservation of a community's character, environmental protection, personal convenience, and the look and feel of where they live.

These challenges face most communities in the best of times. Disasters, the worst of times, decrease the time available to make choices that have lasting impacts.

Urgency becomes a factor. The urgent may drive out importance of effective, sustainable, and creative decisions.

The question is ever before any community, "what would work better in our community if we worked better together?"

This Center draws on its own experiences with community meetings and on nearly forty years of research by the Kettering Foundation on this question. The Mathews Center website provides practical guidance on how to conduct meetings that answer that question. For those interested,

the website also provides resources on the research that forms that practical guidance. Consult www.mathewscenter.org. For Kettering research, consult www.kettering.org.

What's the Problem?

The primary one is who gets to decide and how. The other challenges stem from decisions about who gets how much voice in what is decided.

This aspect relates to how decisions will be made. Who decides and how to do it zero in on what is to be done and what difference will it make.

Our tendency is to look immediately at the fish, That is, what needs to be decided.

Let's look first at the water in which the fish exist. Who decides and how?

Then we will look at the fish. What decisions are needed?

Who Will Decide?

Those who might have a voice in what a community looks like, feels like, and is like after a disaster are several. Each category of voices may have several voices or perspectives within it. For convenience, I will speak of these voices in general categories, recognizing that no category speaks with a single voice.

One set of voices is government. That voice has four basic parts, not often in harmony. Cities and counties both have jurisdictions in many cases. Cities and counties are creatures of the state. They may well have different powers and regulations. State regulations establish parameters for cities and counties. State programs provide various kinds of assistance. Federal regulations establish other parameters. Federal programs provide various kinds of assistance.

At all levels of government, both elected and unelected officials have roles to play. Unelected officials may work for agencies that are not always in sync with one another. School districts, business districts, and governmental districts don't always have the same boundaries or interests.

In some cases, a state or federal highway corridor plan may intersect all other boundaries. Devastated areas have already been partially cleared.

Another set of voices comes from private developers, construction companies, and realtors. They are in business competition with one another to acquire land. They seek to build housing and businesses that return profits. Much devastated land goes on the market for redevelopment.

Another set of voices comes from other businesses. Businesses range from small firms to major corporations. They cut across retail, wholesale, manufacturing, and services. Businesses have significant stakes in how a rebuilt community looks and feels. What purchasing power will characterize new residential areas? What patterns of traffic will emerge? Will the capacities of a redeveloped community foster sustainable economic development?

Another voice comes from civic leadership. These folks usually are those who can control their lunch hours. They can go to meetings. They belong to civic improvement, social, and other organizations that have different visions of what a newly rebuilt community might look, feel, and be like.

Many of these folks are also business people who have private stakes in what happens. They may or may not live in the areas that are objects of redevelopment.

Another voice comes from homeowners and renters in areas that are objects of redevelopment. Decisions affect them directly.

Another voice comes from citizens of all categories who do not live in areas that are objects of redevelopment. Decisions affect them indirectly. For example, where will people live who can no longer live in destroyed areas? What will be the impacts of changes in school attendance zones? Where will more accessible business areas be?

Another voice comes from media coverage of what the other voices are saying. Media may take a role of simply reporting what others are saying and doing. Media may take editorial positions on what should be done.

All these voices may have another voice. Folks in any category may be parents or grandparents and/or concerned citizens who worry about how rebuilding affects children and young people.

Schools were destroyed or impaired in many communities. What educational resources will be available to young people during and after rebuilding? How will new neighborhood housing patterns affect who goes to school where? What will be the tax bases for school districts?

Interlacing many of these parties is the phenomena of social media. Conversations about what should be done, is being done, or might be done abound in many formats. However, these formats are not eyeball-to-eyeball, shoulder-to-shoulder decision-making experiences.

How Will We Decide?

How does a community ask itself, what would work better if we worked better together?

Who gets to decide is a function of how decisions are made. Normal routines for how decisions affecting the community vary from community to community.

People move about their daily lives in routine ways. Some people encounter people from other sets of voices in their routines. Some don't. Their interactions are constrained to one or a few of the categories of concerns mentioned above.

Disasters create non-routine ways of interacting. But those non-routine ways can quickly become routine, once the immediacy of reacting to the disaster lessens. Communities have differing patterns of how conversations occur that are influential in what decisions result.

The larger the community, the more likely these patterns do not intersect. That is, one group of people comprises a network that routinely seeks to influence decisions about economic development. Another network seeks to influence decisions about educational matters. Another network seeks to influence decisions about social services. Another seeks to influence decisions about public health. Some civic organizations cut across these categories. Some don't.

The degree to which these networks intersect has effects on how well the community works together. Some communities have open communication among interests. Some don't.

The smaller a community, the more likely the various sets of voices are interacting with one another. The interactions may be formal meetings. And/or they may be less formal encounters and conversations in business transactions, voluntary organizations including religious ones, and shopping areas and neighborhoods.

The larger a community, the more likely the various sets of voices are not interacting with one another formally or informally in regular ways. Some interactions occur, but they are more likely to be within one or a few of the categories mentioned above. If broader interactions are developed, they are likely initiated by government and/or established civic improvement groups.

At the point of conducting meetings, the question of how meetings are configured becomes important to who decides. How a meeting is designed and conducted fosters two different kinds of communication.

The dominant mode of formal meetings emphasizes vertical communication. That is, people speak individually to one person or panel of persons. The person or persons on the panel respond to the individual.

The panel may be governmental officials empowered to make decisions or to receive information and answer questions relevant to their decision making. The panel may be composed of knowledgeable people – experts – who answer questions and give advice.

Less common but more likely in informal settings are meetings that emphasize lateral communication. That is, people interact with one another. They may be expressing opinions, providing needed information, attempting to persuade one another, and/or together working through hard choices.

Such meetings may involve only one or a few of the categories of voices listed above. That is, the participants may be an interest group of business persons in similar businesses. They may be educators. They may be members of a religious group. They may be members of a civic group. They may be a group of neighbors in a formally or informally constituted neighborhood association. They may be media persons seeking to develop an editorial position. They may be elected and unelected officials seeking to develop policies.

A common outcome for any group that seeks a particular outcome is to work through internal differences and then try to persuade other groups that their group has the right answer.

Sometimes, the time spent in working through internal differences is longer than the time spent in trying to persuade others to act as the originating group has decided. In many cases, the object of persuasion for any group is governmental policy.

What is missing in all but smaller communities are meetings that bring people together from the different categories of voices described above. Even when such a meeting occurs, it is more likely to emphasize vertical communication than lateral communication. Vertical communication emphasizes what are you going to do? Lateral communication emphasizes what are we going to do?

Again, how does a community ask itself, what would work better if we worked better together?

What Is To Be Decided?

Remember that the context in which any decision is made is formed by who has a voice in making it and how is it made. These factors bear on substantive questions.

Substantive questions address a number of interrelated matters. All answers bear on developing a community that people desire to be their home.

An institutional way in which the character of a community surfaces in clear form is in matters relating to zoning regulations. Zoning regulations may or may not be mandated by a minority of residents depending on how power in the community is distributed and activated. Or they may reflect the general attitude of the entire community.

Here are basic approaches to zoning decisions.

1. One position is not to impose zoning regulations. This approach maximizes individual freedom as a thing held valuable. A tradeoff is environmental and aesthetic degradation unless residents have deeply ingrained personal habits of stewardship of community resources.
2. Another position is to impose zoning regulations that maximize economic development. This approach also addresses freedom as a thing held valuable but places that freedom in the service of economic growth. A tradeoff is limits to what people can do with their property. Another tradeoff is potential destruction of environment and historical character.
3. Another position is to impose zoning regulations that protect historical character including environmental concerns. This approach maximizes existing community character or changing that character to someone's definition of better. A tradeoff may be placing severe limits on what people may do with their property. Another tradeoff may be economic stagnation, even regression.

Extreme devastation of an entire area raises an additional aspect of the third possible approach. That aspect is how much public space will be provided in a rebuilding area. This sort of public space may range from parks or green areas to a more extensive central or surrounding commons area.

A geographical area may not have zoning at all for some period of time. But sooner or later an incorporated geographical area will adopt some sort of regulation of building codes within it. If zoning regulations do not exist, recovering from a disaster will likely force attention to them.

Once that arena of regulation is entered, rarely does any incorporated geographical area follow one of these approaches in isolation from the others. Some mix occurs. How that mix is apportioned affects the character of the area.

Implicit in zoning decisions are other factors. The larger the community taking steps to recover from disaster, the harder it may be to have those who stress different factors in the same conversations about needed decisions.

One is what about our children and young people? What sort of schools do they have? Where are they?

Children and young people come from neighborhoods. What sorts of neighborhoods will emerge from rebuilding efforts? What will be mix of affordable housing and commercial property?

Homes are a personal interest. Residential housing is a commercial interest involving family housing, condominiums, garden homes, high rises, and various forms of rental properties. It competes for space with other commercial interests.

Overall commercial interests create jobs for those living in surrounding neighborhoods. To what extent will living space and business space be integrated? Will rebuilt areas be bedroom spaces with workers commuting to more distant jobs? Or will rebuilt areas become more like older neighborhoods with mixes of dwellings and businesses?

What will be the mix of property values? These determine who lives where. Where people live in turn determines the character of the educational institutions that children and young people attend.

Another factor overlays the others. What are the public health effects on people and environmental effects on the physical area for how an area is rebuilt?

All these factors may be heavily influenced by a major intervention in how an area was configured prior to the disaster. For example, a major thoroughfare – whether city, county, state, or federal – will dramatically affect the other factors. In some neighborhoods within a devastated area this factor may be minimal. In other areas, it can be significant.

Therefore, in considering questions about zoning, a rebuilding community will need to think through how it mixes several basic approaches. No one size fits all circumstances.

Every community is unique. The approaches suggested below do not fit every community exactly. The basic idea behind each approach may need to be restated for any community's local situation. Each approach reflects a priority in rebuilding for the future.

1. One approach stresses a free market approach. This approach says that no plan is perfect. No one person, agency, or group has an answer to what a community should look like, feel like, and be like for others. People should have the unfettered right to do what they wish with their property.
2. Another approach stresses economic development. This approach says the creation of jobs and a vibrant economy is uppermost. Private property rights need constraining in order to maximize economic development. Relevant governmental jurisdictions should seize on maximizing economic development. They may do so connecting with an external factor such as construction of new arteries of transportation and/or by zoning decisions and business development decisions that promote rapid economic development.
3. Another approach stresses educational development. Free market and economic development approaches without thought about their effects may radically change opportunities for children and young people to grow up in supportive neighborhoods. Central to these neighborhoods are quality schools and other educational resources.
4. Another approach stresses neighborhood development. Strong neighborhoods are critical to strong towns and cities. Cohesion in neighborhoods is a key factor in what support is given to schools and other educational resources. Cohesion in neighborhoods is a key factor in what sorts of businesses serve the area. Schools, other education resources, green spaces, and convenient and attractive shopping areas are critical to building strong neighborhoods, towns, and cities.

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. Each approach varies in how it applies to a given situation. However, the basic approaches provide a starting place for conversations at every level of decision making. Neighborhoods, religious groups, civic groups, planning commissions, governmental agencies and jurisdictions, and media can all use these basic approaches to work through the decisions they must make.

How Do We Make Hard Choices?

One of the fundamental challenges to making democracy work as it should is developing citizen capacity to make hard choices together. This sort of decision making is different from simply aggregating personal preferences to achieve a majority, often temporary. Choosing what tradeoffs are acceptable and unacceptable among several basic approaches to a problem is hard work.

A human tendency when faced with hard choices is to say “well, we need all of the above.” For example, when faced with the approaches listed above the easy thing to say is we want freedom of choice, economic development, educational development, neighborhood development, environmental quality, etc..

Making deliberative decisions that are effective, sustainable, and creative involves making choices. However, using a framework such as provided above does not mean we choose one of the approaches over the other. Obviously, a community will develop some mix of these approaches. The mechanism for developing that mix is usually zoning regulations.

The question is what emphasis on which approach goes where in an area that must be rebuilt. Therefore, the deeper probing for decision making is how much of each approach goes where.

For example, how much freedom of individual choice does a community permit? In which areas does the community emphasize economic development? What restrictions are placed on economic development to encourage neighborhood integrity, environmental protection, public health, and aesthetic appeal? How does a community aim all these factors to ensure that its children and young people receive adequate educational opportunities?

Moreover, how does the way a community addresses all these factors impact challenges that just won't go away without consistent attention? These systemic challenges include racism, poverty, educational failure, crime, and spillovers to and from dysfunctional families and substance abuse. These are huge issues. Rebuilding a devastated area may create cleaner sheets of paper for thinking about these challenges to community life.

And all these decisions require choices about who decides and how.

What Difference Does It Make?

A key is how to construct those conversations so that people from different perspectives are brought together to decide their common futures. Decisions will reflect a mix of the factors. Everyone in a geographical area will have to live with those decisions or leave.

People took time to address immediate needs in devastated areas. Will they take the same amounts of time and energy to address rebuilding those areas?

As with emergency responses, some things do need to be done immediately. Other things take careful thought and time on how best to do them. What would work better in our community if we worked better together?