



Case: Building Capacity for Economic Recovery and Preparedness in Polk County, Florida

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Polk County is located in central Florida between Tampa and Orlando. The county's population was over 602,000 in 2010, almost doubling over the last 30 years. Of the county's seventeen municipalities, Lakeland is the largest population center and Bartow is the county seat.

The county's three largest industries have historically been phosphate mining, agriculture, and tourism. While phosphate has been actively mined since 1881, the industry has faced a 66 percent decrease in employment in the last decade mostly due to weak demand. Agriculture is the second largest industry in the county with over 35,400 jobs and \$7.7 billion in annual sales. The county also leads the state in citrus production.

Tourism has been a driving force in the economy due in part to the proximity of Disney World in Orlando and the fact that the county serves as a preferred venue for recreational and competitive sports. Since 2008, economic developers have been pursuing the following targeted industry clusters to diversify the local economy: logistics/supply chain; life sciences; agribusiness; and high-tech companies.

DISASTER IMPACTS

In 2004, three hurricanes swept through Florida over the course of three months, each hitting Polk County with significant force. Local officials were surprised by the severity of the damage due to the county's inland position. It was the first time Polk County had sustained any damage from a hurricane since Hurricane Donna in 1960. While the county received the second highest amount of disaster aid in the state from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) at slightly more than \$71 million, there was over \$1.2 billion in damages inflicted throughout the county.

Hurricane Charley

Hurricane Charley made landfall in Polk as a Category 2 hurricane on August 13, 2004 with winds in excess of 110 mph, spawning two tornadoes. Central Florida was impacted with storm precipitation as high as six to eight inches. Charley primarily impacted the eastern portion of

the county, resulting in the destruction of 22,900 homes and businesses and 71 commercial buildings.¹

Hurricane Frances

Hurricane Frances entered the county as a Category 1 hurricane on September 6, 2004, causing damage to 10,456 homes and businesses and nine commercial buildings.²

Hurricane Jeanne

Hurricane Jeanne struck the county as a Category 2 hurricane on September 26th, just three weeks after Frances. While it was difficult to differentiate between damage caused by each of the hurricanes, the city of Lakeland reported five times as many structures damaged by Jeanne as by the other two storms combined. The citrus industry reported the worst damage after Jeanne due to the high wind speeds of up to 100 mph.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE EFFORTS WITH BUSINESS COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Central Florida Development Council (CFDC), a public-private partnership for economic development, was able to provide valuable resources in the response period immediately following each hurricane. The organization's seat on the county's emergency management team helped to facilitate critical communication with FEMA and local government.

CFDC became a concierge center to help relief workers find places to stay, providing a list of vacant buildings and relationships with local developers and hotel operators to FEMA. The list was updated daily to assist FEMA workers, first responders, and other volunteers in finding needed rooms. These placement efforts became a valuable service as many of the hotels in Polk were filled with visitors seeking refuge after evacuating from the coast. In addition, CFDC helped FEMA find a location for a disaster recovery center at the local mall.

Immediately following each disaster, CFDC also played a stopgap role in assessing business needs. FEMA and county government conducted assessments for both residences and businesses, but failed to write down business names and information. CFDC staff and their volunteers went back to these individual businesses to assess damage to their properties. The organization also recruited volunteers for response assistance through outreach to the local business community. Many family-owned businesses responded to the call for help.

ESTABLISHING AN ECONOMIC RECOVERY TEAM TO DRIVE RECOVERY

Despite extensive damage throughout the area, CFDC quickly mobilized an Economic Recovery Team (ERT) immediately after the first hurricane. CFDC reached out to the 13 chambers of

¹ John Chambliss, "Charley Damaged More Than Frances." *The Ledger*. September 24, 2004. A1, A12.

² Ibid.

commerce within the county's 17 municipalities and included them on the recovery team. The team also consisted of CFDC's economic development, tourism, and Small Business Development Center (SBDC) staff. While it was a challenge to contact some of the smaller chambers, CFDC realized the need for their participation and successfully recruited them to the team.

Meetings were set up within the week following each hurricane to discuss available services and programs for impacted businesses and to identify additional programs and services to meet local needs. The ERT was responsible for communicating with businesses about response and recovery efforts, conducting disaster assessments, and staffing business recovery centers where business owners learned about assistance services. Both CFDC and the chambers reported back to their network of members on what was communicated at the meetings. As recovery efforts moved forward, CFDC engaged local bank representatives to join the recovery team as they started to distribute business recovery loans.

Surveying and Outreach as Part of a Team Effort

CFDC's unique relationship with the local chambers allowed each municipality to conduct business impact surveys in their respective jurisdictions and report back to the CFDC on ground-level impacts and damages to local businesses. The Lake Wales Chamber of Commerce created the survey, which was then distributed to the remaining chambers by CFDC's network.

Survey questions included information needed by the ERT on property and equipment damage, space needs, and what additional assistance was necessary to help businesses return to normal operations.³

All CFDC employees immediately became business retention staff for weeks following each hurricane and spent time conducting business outreach. Chamber employees also went door-to-door to meet with local businesses. They were trained in how to follow up on the survey responses and to refer business owners to needed services and agencies. As another effective business retention measure, CFDC kept a list of vacant commercial and industrial space available throughout the county and leveraged the chambers' networks to connect local businesses with these vacant spaces. Businesses were also educated in available assistance, such as financing and technical services available at the business recovery center. Through this outreach, CFDC was able to collect valuable economic damage data on local businesses and better understand their recovery needs. This information was then disseminated to local, state, and federal officials.

ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS RECOVERY CENTER AS A ONE-STOP SHOP FOR SERVICE

Polk County realized that it needed to establish a one-stop shop for business assistance services to retain businesses and prevent business closures or relocations. As the storms impacted

³ To review a copy of the business impact survey, please click here ([hyperlink copy of survey](#)).

mostly the eastern section of the county, the ERT determined to locate the center in that area. The business recovery center was set up in the Eagle Ridge Mall, in a separate storefront from FEMA's disaster recovery center, with assistance from the Lake Wales Chamber of Commerce and the mall. Small Business Administration (SBA) loan officers and the SBDC were co-located at the center as well.

Businesses were referred to local, state, and federal agencies and programs for services. Business counselors immediately referred local businesses to the Florida Small Business Emergency Bridge Loan (FSBEBL) program, which provides an expedient source of working capital to small businesses impacted by a disaster. This is a short-term, interest-free loan program set up by the state with the intention of 'bridging the gap' until the business can secure more long-term sources of capital for recovery, such as insurance claims, commercial loans, and federal programs like the SBA's Disaster Loan program. Business owners with severe property damage were also given information from the list of vacant properties to select temporary locations until their facilities were restored.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO RECOVERY

Effective communication is an essential component of recovery. While the Polk Emergency Management office released a daily news flier in English and Spanish on general topics in community recovery, CFDC and the 13 chambers provided a critical source of needed information for the business community. CFDC updated the homepage of its website daily to provide news bulletins on recovery information needed by local businesses. This included a list of vacant space for temporary needs, a list of licensed contractors within the region, and business recovery resources such as capital and technical assistance programs.

Investing in Communication

CFDC also relied on the local media to communicate about the locations of economic recovery meetings and services available to local businesses, buying several full-page newspaper ads in the local newspaper for advertisement purposes. While the ads cost the organization approximately \$15,000. CFDC saw this as an investment needed to communicate to its key constituents over a wide geographic area – particularly for businesses that were still without power and internet access.

Distributing Lists of Licensed Contractors

Unfortunately, unlicensed contractors commonly attempt to prey on victims in disaster-impacted communities in order to profit from the community's misfortune and the high demand for contracting services. Proactive communities ensure that they have a system of licensing contractors and educating the public on those contractors, as well as a system of enforcement for those who break the law.

In Polk County, CFDC distributed a list of licensed contractors to its network of businesses and chambers after each disaster. Often, these lists were distributed in paper format due to power

outages in many parts of the county. Promoting these lists of licensed contractors helped reduce the amount of fraudulent work in Polk County.

PROVING EMERGENCY FINANCING TO LOCAL BUSINESSES

As previously discussed, Polk County utilized the Florida Emergency Bridge Loans (FSBEBL) program to assist local businesses with immediate working capital needs. Bridge loans were underwritten by Florida First Capital Finance Corporation. The local small business development center (SBDC), which served to provide technical assistance to local business owners and entrepreneurs, is housed within the CFDC; CFDC staff served as part of the committee reviewing loan applications.

Bridge loans were between \$1,000 and \$25,000 per business. Businesses were required to be in operation for a minimum of one year and have between two and 99 employees. Loans were interest free for 90 or 180 days and were processed within 3 to 5 days of receiving the application. Meeting a few times a week after each hurricane, a committee of five members reviewed all of the applications. The committee members included three local bankers, one community representative from CFDC, and one representative from Enterprise Florida, Inc. or the Governors Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development. CFDC was located within a bank building, which made it convenient to meet multiple times a week.

Two thirds of the applications were approved by the committee. Those that were declined did not have the necessary documentation. For an application to be approved, the committee needed to review reports from the insurance company and pictures of the building. The committee also needed to know the money would be used for rebuilding costs and equipment replacement.

Banks also put together packages for long-term customers in addition to the bridge loans. The banks benefited from Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) credits and publicity.

RECOGNIZING 'HURRICANE HEROES' WHILE SUPPORTING TOURISM PROMOTION

CFDC developed the concept of 'hurricane heroes' as a strategy not only to jumpstart Polk County's tourism industry but also to thank the companies that helped throughout the recovery process. CFDC's executive director personally delivered plaques to companies that sent workers to assist in the recovery efforts.

While visiting the companies, CFDC asked the CEOs to use their internal communication networks to announce a discount program for employees that had volunteered. Discounts at hotels, restaurants, and attractions throughout Polk County were made available to these volunteers and a coupon book was distributed to promote the program. Many of the employees did take advantage of the discounts, resulting in one of Polk County's best tourist seasons.

STRONG BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT IN DISASTER PLANNING FOR REDEVELOPMENT

Following the 2004 / 2005 hurricane season, the state of Florida recognized the need for communities to engage in a comprehensive planning effort to discuss post-disaster redevelopment issues in a pre-disaster environment. A focus group of local, state, and federal government and university officials was convened in 2007 to create guidelines for such a planning effort. The focus group developed a pilot program for post-disaster redevelopment planning. The five pilot communities included Polk County as well as Panama City, Hillsborough County, Nassau County, and Manatee County.

These pilot projects were funded by grants from FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant program, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Florida Coastal Management Program, and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Each planning process would be organized along the following six discipline workgroups:

- Economic Redevelopment
- Housing, Building and Historic Preservation
- Infrastructure
- Health and Human Services
- Land Use and Environmental Issues
- Government Operations

While a transportation planner from Polk County's planning department served as the project coordinator, the County also hired the consulting firm, Calvin, Giordano & Associates, Inc., to facilitate the planning process. To overcome challenges in engaging community stakeholders, the County pursued a comprehensive outreach program, including an invitation letter from the county administrator, to educate and build support among community members.

County and City government representatives, chambers of commerce, and CFDC participated in the planning workgroup focused on economic redevelopment. Each working group had a chairperson on the executive committee. The group members participated in six large-scale meetings and in smaller one-on-one coordination meetings and conference calls. At each large-scale meeting, an opening plenary session provided a brief overview of the project and was followed by two-hour meetings in working groups. A series of questions were provided to each group to drive discussions. At the end, the participants came together to present the highlights from each of the working groups' meetings.

Overall, the plan developed a set of goals for post-disaster redevelopment. Within each goal, a set of tasks was created. The tasks led to an action plan, *The Post-Disaster Redevelopment Plan*, which included who was responsible, a time frame, and the resources needed for completing the action.

The plan was broad-based. As tasks were completed, Polk County could create ordinances to expedite permitting and other processes needed to respond to a disaster. The Polk County Board of County Commissioners adopted the plan and voted to support future implementation; however, no budget commitments were made. One municipality voted to endorse the plan. A few of the participants still meet on a regular basis to finish parts of the plan that were not completed within the original eighteen-month timeline.

The redevelopment planning process assessed the capabilities of each participant's agency or organization and incorporated that information into a plan for responding to the next disaster. As a result of the process, more agencies now communicate with one another to recommend actions for ensuring greater preparedness. Since this was the first time a plan of this nature was created in Polk County, a learning curve contributed to some delays. In the future, such delays would need to be considered when creating support for the planning process and deadlines for the plan.

Once the working groups were created, it was important to continually engage them in the process. There were a number of turnovers, layoffs, agency mergers, and government reorganizations during the planning process, but by regularly engaging the working groups as new representatives joined the process, the new members were easily able to participate.

From the pilot projects, a tool kit was created for Florida communities to use in disaster planning. The tool kit includes a handbook and training videos, which can be downloaded at <http://www.floridajobs.org/community-planning-and-development/programs/technical-assistance/community-resiliency/post-disaster-redevelopment-planning/toolkit>.

LOOKING FORWARD: BETTER PREPARED FOR THE FUTURE

Developing an Emergency Support Function Team With Economic Development Involvement

After Hurricane Charley, the Polk County's emergency response team (ERT) transformed into an official Emergency Support Function (ESF 18) as part of Florida's state-level ESF 18 system. The ESF model, originally developed by FEMA, enables government agencies to better coordinate their disaster response and recovery efforts in multiple areas.

The ESF 18 group specifically deals with recovery efforts related to business and industry. The creation of the ESF 18 team at the local level allows Polk County's economic recovery team greater access to federal and state emergency funding like planning and mitigation grants. Polk County Office of Economic Development (OED) has used these funds to work on the *Post-Disaster Redevelopment Plan* discussed in the "Proactive Disaster Planning" section.

Creating a Business Continuity Guide for Small Businesses

After the 2004 hurricane season, CFDC researched what other communities and counties were recommending to their businesses regarding disaster preparedness and created a disaster

preparation and business continuity guide for local businesses to help them prepare for future disasters. Included in the guide are:

- Emergency hotlinks,
- Insurance coverage worksheets,
- Tips on what to do before and after a storm,
- Check lists to ensure the business is prepared,
- Forms to complete in preparation,
- GIS-mapped flood zones, and
- A list of approved contractors.

The guide is placed on the CFDC's website for immediate access by local businesses.

Identifying Future Business Recovery Centers

Polk County has had discussions with vacant property owners in preparation for future hurricanes. In case of an emergency, the county has arranged for the use of space at the Lakeland Airside Center and in the city of Bartow. The Airside Center next to the Lakeland Linder Airport can provide access to supply lines during a natural disaster. Linder Airport was used as a staging area in 2004.

The CFDC also regularly maintains a list of vacant facilities to be used for additional business recovery centers. Prior to a disaster, the CFDC makes sure they have a hard copy of this list on hand to be used in the event of a power outage caused by the storm. This ensures that they have quick access to this list and can start using it before the lights come back on.

Keeping Communication Lines Open

The hurricanes knocked out the electricity in many areas, making communication with local businesses and partners in the recovery efforts a challenge. Following the 2004 hurricane season, local economic development leaders recommended a back-up website location in a data center or a remote location (possibly out of state).

As mentioned previously, the CFDC spent over \$15,000 on advertisements in the local newspaper to inform businesses of where they could get post-disaster relief services. The CFDC has worked out a deal with the local newspaper in advance so that in the case of a disaster, the newspaper will provide advertisement space at a reduced cost or a special news column in order to inform businesses of relief services.

SUMMARY

After 44 years without a hurricane, Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne took Polk County by surprise and left a destructive force, which had significant impacts on the community including local businesses. Still, local economic development organizations and chambers of commerce quickly mobilized to jumpstart Polk County's local economy and facilitate recovery. By creating the emergency response team (ERT) and focusing on the immediate needs of local

businesses, the CFDC and its partners were able to provide the necessary immediate treatment and set local businesses up to receive more long-term assistance.

The co-location of SBA, SBDC, and CFDC staff at the local business recovery center provided a central location where business owners could obtain the information and assistance they needed for recovery purposes. State funding mechanisms, such as the Florida Small Business Emergency Bridge Loan program, provided critical short-term financing to help local businesses to stay open and bridge to longer-term financing. Newspaper ads enabled the EDOs and chambers to more widely distribute critical information on relief and recovery efforts to local businesses.

Finally, Polk County used these storms as an opportunity to improve its disaster planning efforts so that the business community – and the community at large – would be better prepared for future incidents. Because Polk County and the CFDC recognized the importance of immediate response efforts, constant communication, and prioritizing critical recovery initiatives, the county was able to successfully recover from the three devastating hurricanes, which could have otherwise had severe long-term impacts on the local economy.