



THE ASSEMBLY
STATE OF NEW YORK
ALBANY

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Westchester County

Committee on
Corporations, Authorities, and Commissions

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN RICHARD BRODSKY
ON THE ADEQUACY OF THE NEW YORK CITY EVACUATION PLAN

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY
CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 25, 2005

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee on a matter of enormous public importance. I appear as Chairman of the Assembly Committee charged with oversight of authorities and institutions responsible for evacuation and emergency response planning, along with my colleagues Chairman Scott Stringer of the Committee on Cities, and RoAnne DeStito, Chairwoman of the Committee on Government Operations. And I share with the Chairman and the Committee their strong commitment to legislative oversight of the Executive Branch in this and on other matters.

I came to the investigation of New York City's evacuation and emergency response plan with the hard-won experience of doing the first investigation into the evacuation plans for the Indian Point nuclear facility in Westchester County, completed in February of 2002. Our investigation and Report for the first time put an evacuation plan under public scrutiny, and revealed its shortcomings and inadequacies, which, unfortunately, remain fundamentally uncorrected. A copy of the Report is provided to the Committee.

The *Preliminary Report* we completed ten days ago is, similarly, the first outside investigation into the City's Plan to evacuate and shelter residents in the event of a weather-related emergency. A copy of the *Preliminary Report* was provided to the Committee ten days ago. The Report has uncovered a series of gaps, flaws, questionable assumptions, and disturbing admissions that raise substantial and serious questions about the ability of the City to evacuate residents in the event of a hurricane or similar weather-related emergency. These concerns are set forth in detail in the Report. They may be summarized as involving six specific areas of concern.

1. THE CITY'S ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE TO BE EVACUATED AND/OR SHELTERED ARE INCONSISTENT AND MAY SIGNIFICANTLY UNDERESTIMATE THE ACTUAL NUMBER.

The City estimates that a worse case hurricane will require the evacuation of 1,000,000 people and the sheltering of 225,000. The City's own documents, however, which include the New York State Hurricane Evacuation Study predict the evacuation of as many as 2,500,000 people, with a consequential shelter requirement of well over 1,000,000. The City's assumption of a shelter requirement of only 225,000 is contradicted by its own New York State Hurricane Evacuation Study Behavioral Analysis Findings in which 45%, or 450,000, of residents say they will seek public shelter. The City's explanation of its reduction from 45% to 22.5 % is puzzling. It first asserts that the shelter system is so undesirable that people will not show up. *"During an evacuation many evacuees become more aware of some of the less desirable aspects of hurricane shelters and decide on other alternatives."* No explanation of these "less desirable aspects" is given. It then asserts three other reasons relying on the difficulty posed by its own "reception center" process, pet ownership, and the availability of other shelter opportunities. *"Approximately 40% of those intending to go to a hurricane shelter said they would not do so after hearing about the reception center procedure. Many pet owners planning to take their pets to hurricane shelters will not be allowed to do so. At least 70% of those intending to go to a hurricane shelter said they have friends or relatives in safe locations with whom they could stay."* These are the only published bases for a reduction of the number of persons seeking shelter by one half, and are, at best, subject to challenge. It is unclear if the City has the capacity to shelter people at the higher range of estimates. Given the City's own documents showing a range of possibilities from 1,000,000 to 2,500,000 evacuees, and 225,000 to over 1,000,000 seeking shelter, these contradictions and bizarre explanations must be publicly clarified. (For a full discussion and citation to documents see *Report*, p 12),

2. THE AVAILABILITY AND DEPLOYMENT OF MASS TRANSIT RESOURCES ARE UNCLEAR AND APPEAR OVERLY COMPLICATED AND INEFFICIENT.

The Plan relies on mass transit, as supplied by the MTA, the Port Authority, school bus companies, and others. Yet the MTA has not done an inventory of its resources, and MTA and other employees have not been contacted about their evacuation responsibilities. The total available resources must be clarified and the cooperation of those who must drive into an evacuation zone must be secured.

The Plans' reliance on mass transit is also complicated by the difficulty in determining how to get people to the transit routes, and then to the two-tiered sheltering process. Residents are not allowed to proceed directly to shelters.

They must first go to a reception center which will dispatch them to the appropriate shelter. This seems to double the transit needs. Furthermore, many of the reception centers are either partially or fully inaccessible to mass transit. Additionally, the Plan now assumes that regular bus routes will continue as the main source of transportation. Residents difficulty in getting to regular routes and from them to reception centers, and then to shelters, does not seem to have been considered. (For a fuller discussion see Report pp. 6and 7)

3. THE PLAN DOES NOT SPECIFY THE EVACUATION PATHWAYS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS, SUCH AS THOSE IN NURSING HOMES, HOSPITALS, GROUP HOMES, OR OTHER INSTITUTIONS, OR THOSE WHO ARE NOT FULLY MOBILE.

The Plan does not specify, by category or specific facility, the methods of evacuation, and the resources needed for special populations.

4. THE PLAN DOES NOT ADEQUATELY CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF ROAD AND TRANSIT CONGESTION ON THE ABILITY TO EVACUATE.

The time it will take to evacuate is directly dependent on assumptions about congestion, road and rail capacity, and public behavior, including "self-evacuation" by residents outside of evacuation zones who are not instructed to leave. The Plan makes no explicit statement about those assumptions. In a second bizarre admission, however, the Plan acknowledges that congestion is a very dangerous problem which will probably force large numbers of those seeking to evacuate to stay home. *"The clogging of streets and public transportation facilities and the jamming of evacuation reception centers would be so great and occur so early that the condition will probably remedy itself. People would stop evacuating simply because they were unable to evacuate."* The Plan does not explain the fate of those unable to evacuate. (For a fuller discussion see *Report*, p.9)

5. THERE APPEARS TO BE LITTLE COORDINATION BETWEEN THE PLANS OF NEIGHBORING MUNICIPALITIES

The City's Plan appears to assume the full availability of regional resources for its own execution, and does not appear to calculate the congestion consequences of evacuation by other municipalities. It should be noted that In the event of a multi-municipal evacuation, legal control of the evacuation of New York City will shift from the Office of Emergency Management to the State Emergency Management Office, which is empowered to coordinate competing claims on resources and to decide how and when the City is to be evacuated. In many cases, it appears that the legal consequence of multi-municipal evacuation was a factor in the City's decision to retain all shelter and evacuation resources within City limits. One consequence of this decision is that all residents of Staten Island

are to be sheltered on Staten Island, with no evacuation or sheltering planned in New Jersey or other Boroughs.

6. THE CITY'S ATTEMPTS TO EDUCATE RESIDENTS ABOUT THE EVACUATION PLAN HAS NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL.

The City has not yet been able to effectively explain to people where they are to go, how they are to travel, or how they are to get information as an evacuation approaches and occurs. One-third of City residents in evacuation zones were unaware of that fact. One-half of City residents outside of evacuation zones believed they would need to evacuate. Three-quarters of City residents are unaware of evacuation zones. And 85% of City residents have never seen the City's evacuation materials. If there is not a significant increase in public awareness, all the good will of the residents, and technical competency of the evacuation teams will be of little practical value. (For a fuller discussion of this matter see *Report*, pp.10-11)

These and other important questions are more fully explored in the *Report*. While the leadership of OEM has appeared willing to discuss these matters, and has stated that the Report is important and well-crafted, the City Administration has repeatedly attempted to control or limit public discussion, a phenomenon that we saw in the Indian Point controversy as well. The full Plan has not yet been released, nor have the questions raised been answered, although OEM promises to do so by Thursday. A full public discussion of the Plan is necessary, and will be helpful in the ongoing effort to improve the Plan.

In the end, we have been warned. Hurricane Katrina showed us all how vulnerable we truly are, how the poor, and disabled, and old, and minority communities suffer disproportionately, how real and human is the cost in lives, and how government at all levels can be unprepared and uncaring. We need to sweep away the veil of secrecy some would put on evacuation planning, talk plainly and honestly to our fellow citizens about the risks and limitations of evacuations, and change this Plan now. I believe the professionals entrusted with this process understand this. I hope government, including this Committee, will ensure they do so immediately and without interference.