

ANTICIPATE WORSE THAN SANDY

Long Island's recent nightmare proves why local governments must update their plans for disasters

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PHOTO BY JAMES CARBONE

A North Lindenhurst firefighter ferries a family to safety as superstorm Sandy arrives on Oct. 29.

EDITORIAL
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What happens next time? Five weeks ago, it was superstorm Sandy that laid waste to Long Island, killing 13 people here, taking out homes with water, wind and fire, plunging most of us into indefinite darkness, and cutting our gas-line supply.

Sandy is now regarded as the worst natural disaster in Long Island history. But other superstorms have reaped death and destruction in these parts, too.

While Hurricane Gloria provided a few Category 3 gusts in 1985, it still walloped Long Island, claiming one life and doing \$300 million worth of damage. The 1938 Long Island Express, a Category 3 hurricane, took 45 lives at a time when Long Island was far less populated.

The Next Big One after Sandy may

not wait 74 years. Meteorologists say we should expect superstorms to hit with increased frequency in coming years. The harbingers of trouble are there.

We need to inventory what went right on Long Island after Sandy and what went wrong, so we can minimize the death and destruction we're likely to see in future superstorms.

Don't forget, by the time Sandy hit New York City and Long Island, it wasn't a hurricane, but a tropical storm that happened to come at high tide with a full moon and cause 14-foot surges.

Meteorologists believe a Category 3 hurricane like the Long Island Express would be far more devastating, with surges of up to 30 feet on the South Shore that would send water as far inland as the Southern State Parkway.



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ANTICIPATE WORSE THAN SANDY

Last week, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced appointments to three state commissions charged with finding ways to overhaul, among other things, the state's emergency preparedness and response capabilities.

One of these commissions should hold hearings on Long Island. Without them, there's a good risk that many of our most pressing problems and needs will be overlooked. We need to hear firsthand testimony that provides an action plan specifically for Long Island.

Why just for us? Two reasons:

We're more vulnerable than most other places. As an island jutting 118 miles into the Atlantic Ocean with a population of 2.8 million, a mass evacuation would be difficult if not impossible.

Emergency management experts say a Category 3 hurricane would quickly incapacitate many of the bridges Long Islanders use to reach the mainland. And the Queens-Midtown Tunnel and Hugh L. Carey Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel are even dicier when the chips are down. Superstorm Sandy quickly filled both with seawater.

Growth has intensified Long Island's vulnerability. When the Long Island Express struck in 1938, our population was just 600,000. Since the late 1940s, we have added – in exponential increments – people, subdivisions, cars, highways, schools, shopping malls, you name it. The result: We now have more lives and property in harm's way than ever. Sandy's impact on Long Island's economy is already estimated at \$10 billion.

We're organized much differently than New York City or any other part of the state. Long Island relies on a highly balkanized patchwork of 275 small, local governments to provide many of its first-responders. We urgently need to find and identify ways to help them work together more effectively.

Local first-responders do many things

well. In a small community during a storm, who knows better where to find the frail, the ill and the immobile? The problem begins when the entire Island goes into a state of emergency. It's too easy for small localities to get lost in the shuffle.

After Sandy, there were stories of local officials who couldn't work the two-way radios they had been given for emergency use. There were reports that nonstop calls from local officials overwhelmed emergency management personnel at the county level.

Local officials say county personnel were sometimes hard to reach, that coordination fell apart here and there, and leaders in villages and hamlets were often left to scramble on their own for necessities like portable light poles.

So how could hearings help?

They could clear up some of the murkiness regarding preparedness and training for local responders. How many of our first-responders found themselves victims of Sandy at their own homes and rescue locations?

Hearings could suggest ways to ensure that local responders get regular drills on emergency plans and procedures.

They could look for ways to ensure that crucial supplies get to the localities that need them most.

After Tropical Storm Irene last year, stockpiles of resources were placed at strategic locations around the state to help communities weather future emergencies. But strangely enough, none went to Long Island, the community that's always the most isolated in a natural disaster, the place that always needs its own cache of supplies.

That kind of thinking has to stop.

Sandy's ferocity surprised us all. Still, evidence suggests that our patchwork of local response teams could have functioned better with tighter coordination and the needed supplies. We need to fix this before the Next Big One hits.