

*From standardized templates to context-appropriate plans: Barriers to the adoption of locally sustainable coastal evacuation programs*

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Abstract: Federal and state involvement in emergency management planning is often aimed at low-frequency, high-impact events, or at specific weaknesses in “lessons learned” from actual events. However, such initiatives do not necessarily account for regional differences in hazard characteristics, planning processes, response structures and practical application. This research investigates the influence of externally-devised emergency management initiatives on coastal evacuation planning. Specific objectives are to identify factors dictating local coastal hazard planning activities, analyze the efficacy of local programs within the regional geography of coastal New Jersey, and assess the degree to which contextual hazard analysis can improve approaches to coastal evacuation planning. Surveys were provided to 83 coastal communities in New Jersey over a four-year period that addressed coastal evacuation planning needs and externally-devised emergency management initiatives since the events of September 11, 2001. Comments from 40 discrete communities, along with 10 follow-up interviews indicate disconnections between top-down “template planning” initiatives and local needs. Research results demonstrate that 1) Federal initiatives are not necessarily congruent with needs and priorities at municipal levels, 2) such initiatives are not clearly and effectively incorporated into local planning, and 3) there is a lack of long-term support for program success from such initiatives. This research reveals that although such projects may have merit, that value is lost if critical local needs are subordinated in favor of the template planning initiatives. In order to increase efficacy of planning efforts, Federal and state initiatives should be integrated into local planning needs, possibly through formal regional designations, to enhance planning outcomes and emphasize needs unique to local geography.