

Testimony of Mayor David N. Cicilline
Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island
Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
Field Hearing – Providence Foundation
April 20, 2006

Madam Chair, Senator Chafee...

Welcome to Providence Madam Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to offer my testimony to this esteemed committee.

On behalf of our city, I thank you for the committee's efforts to protect our city, state, and nation from the threats of terrorism and natural disaster.

As our focus today underscores, recent events have taught us that we do not have the luxury of preparing for terrorist events at the expense of being ready for natural disasters.

Both threats are imminent and share equal priority.

In fact, with a terrorist incident, it is a matter of if it will happen. With a natural disaster like a major hurricane, it is only a matter of when.

In Providence, we know exactly what a devastating hurricane can do to our city.

If you walk straight out of this building about 100 yards to the Amica Building at 10 Weybosset, you can reach up eight feet to a brass plaque that shows how high the water rose during the Hurricane of 1938. And several inches under that is another plaque showing the waterline from Hurricane Carol in 1954.

The hurricane of '38 cost about 300 million in pre-World War II dollars. Needless to say, if that kind of flooding were to happen in Providence again, the costs would be enormous.

280 acres that make up the economic engine of the State of Rhode Island and the Southern New England region would be drowned.

Hundreds of businesses, thousands of jobs, hundreds of condos and apartments, the region's transportation hub, the seat of City government, our federal and state court houses, state offices, the region's major newspaper, dozens of facilities from four universities, our city's power, sewer and water systems – all of these would be affected.

Fortunately, something now stands in the way of a major hurricane and that kind of devastation in Providence, and that is our Hurricane Barrier.

As you know, Southern New England has a wealth of precious assets, but when you consider what it protects, our hurricane barrier may be one of the most precious.

I am pleased to report that, with a tremendous amount of support from Senator Chafee, we have invested a great deal in recent years to bolster our hurricane barrier.

Over the last several years, over \$2 million has been invested to upgrade the facility. Most of that has been made possible through federal funds, but our local property taxpayers have also shared much of the burden and the facility is maintained by our own Providence Department of Public Works.

We are confident that the hurricane barrier can withstand up to a Category 4 storm surge, which would be 18 feet above median water levels, but there is still more we need to do in order to fully bring it up to date according to the experts.

The major upgrade required is to the electrical system, but there is a variety of smaller fixes that should be made as well.

When the hurricane barrier was first constructed, it was envisioned as a “local protection project” but its vital function has clearly outgrown this definition.

While we are confident in our hurricane barrier, it is only responsible that we are prepared for a breach or for some other kind of unforeseen natural disaster.

There are several other areas in which our emergency response plans need the kind of fortification that can only be provided at the federal level.

The FEMA maps that we rely on to estimate coastal flooding hazards are over 20 years-old, and new development has altered watersheds and floodplains. We strongly support your honorable colleague, Senator Reed’s National Flood Mapping Act that would require an update of these maps.

We need funding to support the reengineering of roadways used as evacuation routes to better support high volume traffic and create extra large breakdown lanes to aid traffic flow.

While we have a plan for emergency shelters, the cost of maintaining them over a number of days or weeks is prohibitive for a municipality. We need support to cover costs such as the purchase of generators, the construction of bathrooms and showers, and larger cooking facilities.

These investments will pay tremendous dividends in the event of a major natural disaster.

Madam Chair, Senator Chafee: I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to submit testimony to this honorable committee.

Thank you very much.