



U.S. Representative • 9TH CD, New York • Brooklyn-Queens

ANTHONY D. WEINER

Report

NO WAY OUT

***CITY HAS FAILED TO UPGRADE
ROCKAWAY EVACUATION PLAN***

SHORTCHANGED CITY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hurricane Isabel cut a wide swath of destruction through the East Coast and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. Approximately 6 million people from North Carolina to New York lost power because of the storm, with over a million still living in the dark in Virginia, Maryland and Washington D.C. Downed trees and power lines, closed roads, and flooding plagued residents up and down the eastern seaboard for days. North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware have been declared national disaster areas, suffering millions of dollars worth of property damage. At least 38 people have died.

And for residents of the Rockaway, it could have been a lot worse. A storm track that looked like 'Isabel' might hit New York City head-on instead drifted south west, and we were spared the full brunt of her fury.

But a look at another ocean front community that had the misfortune of being directly in Isabel's path is instructive. In Kitty Hawk, on North Carolina's Outer Banks, as many as 25 oceanfront homes were destroyed or yanked from their foundations, and three fishing piers fell into the sea. Today, substantial portions of the one highway through the 120 mile barrier islands are simply gone, much of what's left pocked with huge holes. Authorities in Cape Hatteras North Carolina are working around the clock to account for the 4,000 coastal residents who did not evacuate.

Rockaway is home to over 100,000 residents, some of the City's most popular beaches and cherished beach front property. Bounded on two sides by water—Jamaica Bay on the north and the Atlantic Ocean on the south—Rockaway's primary access to the mainland is via two narrow bridges, the Gil Hodges Memorial Bridge and the Cross Bay Bridge, as well as the Nassau Expressway. Had Isabel hit New York City, the residents of Rockaway would have been among the City's most vulnerable.

And therein lies the problem. According to this report, the Rockaway's evacuation route may not have been up to the task of getting them to safety.

Over the past week, staff for Reps. Weiner and Meeks have reviewed hundreds of pages of transcripts from New York City Council Committee on Transportation hearings held in April of 1998 regarding the Rockaway evacuation plan. At the hearing, experts and community activists including the then Director of the Office of Emergency Management Jerome Hauer and Queens Community Board 14 District Manager Jonathan Gaska urged several needed reforms. However, according to the *Weiner/Meeks* review, the City has failed to implement, either in part or in full,

all but one of the reforms.

That's unacceptable and, worse, it's unsafe. Five years was more than enough time to make Rockaway a safer place to live. It's time for the City to implement an overhaul of the Rockaway's evacuation plan. Now. Before the next 'Isabel' makes landfall.

STUDY FINDINGS

On April 23, 1998, the New York City Council Committee on Transportation held hearings on the safety of Rockaway's evacuation plan. The findings were troubling. Experts and Rockaway leaders, including then Director of the Office of Emergency Management Jerome Hauer and Queens Community Board 14 District Manager Jonathan Gaska, testified to several problems with the plan, all of which needed immediate upgrades. Last week, Weiner/Meeks staff reviewed hundreds of pages of testimony, and identified eight specific and needed reforms, all of which could have been implemented by the City long before the Isabel threat. As you will find below, most have not been.

For the purposes of the report, staff assigned a grade to each of the City's efforts.

- **Posting of Evacuation Route – Grade: F**

Problem: Residents are not familiar with Rockaway evacuation route.

CB 14 Recommendation: Post evacuation routes along well traveled roadways. Gaska testified that the City should “post the route.”

City Action: City has failed to post evacuation routes in Rockaway.

- **Installation of Evacuation Siren – Grade: F**

Problem: Alerting residents that they should evacuate.

CB 14 Recommendation: Install evacuation siren. Gaska testified that the City should “consider putting evacuation sirens, sirens like they have on Long Island to let the volunteer firemen know that there is a fire...these sirens would go off and people would know that there may be a problem, to tune into their tvs.”

City Action: City has failed to install an evacuation siren in Rockaway.

- **Reconfiguration of Evacuation Route – Grade: F**

Problem: Nassau County and Far Rockaway evacuation routes cross paths, risking backed up traffic and accidents at worst possible time.

OEM Recommendation: Hauer testified that the City needs to develop a “common plan” so people fleeing a hurricane do not “run into each other.” Hauer explained, “the problem with the old plan was...we wound up crossing paths with everybody...from Nassau County and the Rockaways.”

City Action: None. Nassau and Rockaway evacuation routes still cross, and there are no plans to correct the problem.

- **Publication of Evacuation Plan – Grade: D**

Problem: Residents are not familiar with Rockaway evacuation route.

OEM Recommendation: Hauer testified that the City should print “hundreds and hundreds” of copies of evacuation plan and “have meetings with groups that distribute the plan.” According to Hauer, OEM should “get everybody involved” so that “all the areas that need to be advised” are advised.

City Action: OEM has dramatically improved their website to provide evacuation information, but only to those who have internet access and retain power during a storm. The agency has also made citywide information available. However, the agency has not attended any Rockaway community meetings since 1999, and did not distribute any Rockaway specific information in connection with ‘Isabel’. The 100th Precinct distributed some evacuation route information, but did so without the OEM’s assistance or knowledge.

- **Answering Questions About Evacuation Plan – Grade: D**

Problem: Residents don’t know where to ask questions about evacuation plan.

CB 14 Recommendation: According to Gaska, the City must establish a “better communication system” with the community.

City Action: City has established citywide 3-1-1 program to provide information, as well as a website, but has not attended any community meetings in Rockaway for four years, and distributed no materials on Rockaway prior to Isabel.

- **Evacuation Plan for Elderly and Disabled -- Grade: D**

Problem: Difficulty of evacuating Rockaway’s high % of elderly and disabled.

OEM Recommendation: Hauer testified that “special consideration” needs to be paid to these populations by evacuation planners.

City Action: Few special steps were taken with regards to seniors and disabled not living in nursing homes or hospitals. OEM called local nursing homes and hospitals to remind them to check to make sure their generators were working and that they had enough medical supplies, and provided general information to senior centers.

- **Installation of Tidal Gauges – Grade: A**

Problem: Tidal gauges assist authorities in ascertaining water levels, but Rockaway had none in 1998.

OEM Recommendation: Install tidal gauges in Jamaica Bay.

City Action: OEM has installed tidal gauges in Jamaica Bay inlet and Inwood.

- **Rescue Equipment on Rockaway – Grade: Incomplete**

Problem: Bringing rescue equipment to Rockaway during a hurricane would be logistical nightmare.

CB 14 Recommendation: Gaska recommended stationing rescue equipment “on the peninsula and on Broad Channel.” Gaska testified that “the Board requested a number of things: that rescue equipment be stationed on the peninsula and on Broad Channel, Zodiac graphs, motors, exposure suits, amphibious vehicles, water pumps and electric generators be positioned strategically throughout the peninsula, because as the Commissioner said, and from our experience in 1992, they couldn’t get the equipment in to help people.”

City Action: Unknown. OEM will not disclose whether emergency equipment is stationed on Rockaway, and if so, where.

Reports List