

Building Continuity of Operations for Regional Businesses

Initiative Summary Statement:

Continue building relationships with businesses, government and community-based organizations in the region and support business continuity planning for disaster preparedness and recovery.

Initiative Description:

Objective: As the region focuses on economic recovery, one of the most salient components is resiliency of the private sector. The capability of the private sector to remain operational is critical to maintaining and/or quickly recovering economic activity in the County. The private sector owns/manages critical community lifelines (e.g., local airports, electrical supply, grocery stores, pharmacies) and contributes to the long-term vitality of the community (e.g., arts and culture businesses). The following activities would provide additional resources to bolster continuity of operations planning within the private sector:

1. Continuing to provide event-specific recovery guidance;
2. Developing an all-hazards preparedness business continuity toolkit and training that could be made available to companies in the region, including small businesses, larger corporations, and remote/virtual workers throughout Lee County;
3. Increasing investment in resources to assist County businesses with the following: businesses development including identifying target markets/customers, recovery guidance, identifying financing, analyzing financial statements, creating marketing strategies, and providing input on new product ideas; and
4. Continuing to support the work begun by the Lee County Economic Development Office (EDO) and the Horizon Council to establish and maintain a Business Hub. Coordination with Visitor and Convention Bureau to reinforce unified communication. The Hub is a reliable central source of information where businesses can find a common methodology to assess the damage and economic impacts on the business community following a disaster. It can also become a repository for business disaster planning tools.

All four of lines of effort would enhance Lee County's standing as a competitive, business-friendly region in Southwest Florida.

Need: The Lee County economic landscape dramatically changed, with little to no warning, in the past few years because of two disasters, COVID-19 and Hurricane Ian; creating more tools for the private sector to prepare for and recover from these types of events will make

the County more resilient. While the private sector entities in the County have been flexible and adaptable, the impacts of recent large disasters have been difficult; many businesses have not fully returned to normal operations.

Improving communication strategies for sharing critical information and resources could be an impactful next step. There are many government and local professional organizations creating resiliency programs, providing business coaching, offering mentoring assistance, and helping to identify funding options but if the business community is not aware of or able to access these resources in a timely manner, then it may affect their ability to stay in business.

Sourcing and procuring were issues in the past two disasters; developing an existing inventory purchasing program throughout industries in the County could mitigate this issue. Another identified issue is a need for specific resources geared towards the non-for-profit sector, especially for the arts and culture community. A noted gap from previous incidents includes the lack of capacity and capability to manage post-recovery distribution of philanthropy and not having a centrally organized system to track and manage the influx of requests.

Small businesses face unique challenges and tend to have less access to resources. According to FEMA, about 25% of businesses do not reopen after disasters, and small businesses are disproportionately affected and less likely to make a full recovery. Having an emergency disaster plan and a continuity of operations plan in place can reduce that risk and help the business recover faster. There is a need to continue improving disaster preparedness and coordinated recovery efforts. Strengthening the connection between private industry and local Emergency Management will help identify best practices for developing business continuity plans, assist with preparedness training, reduce risk, and help the business recover faster.

Regional Approach: Building relationships within the business community and between other organizations and the appropriate government department will strengthen the region's ability to face pertinent issues and endure future hazards. Hurricane Ian was a major catastrophe that affected the entire region's economic system. The hardest-hit areas included the Cape Coral-Ft. Myers, Punta Gorda, and Naples metropolitan areas. These areas account for over \$150 billion of annual economic output in Florida, nearly 15% of the state's economy. Much of private industry operates critical infrastructure, essential businesses, and employes over 150,000 people in the County. All over Lee County, a diverse and hardworking workforce contributes to carrying out essential activities, from Chico's, to the shrimp boats of Fort Myers Beach, from Lee Memorial Health System to the Alliance for the Arts, and to many home-based businesses. During the recent disasters, businesses

and workers were a critical component of restoring normalcy and rebuilding the community.

Expanding and augmenting the efforts that are already underway like partnering with other local business resources such as SCORE, Horizon Council, Southwest Florida Enterprise Center, Florida SBDC at Florida Gulf Coast University, SW Florida Impact Partners LLC, local Chambers of Commerce, and Lee Building Industry Association in support of business resiliency will support the strength of the entire economy of Lee County. The regional approach should also be mindful that many businesses are owned by Spanish and Haitian Creole speaking entrepreneurs. A unified and consolidated approach will prevent a fragmented economic recovery and be the catalyst to building back stronger.

Impact: The determination of best ways to organize and strengthen assets, capacities, and interests will be more effective when the region collectively understands the needs of the whole business community. The creation of the local Business Hub has potential to be the driving force to accomplish many of the stated objectives. It could strengthen communication and information sharing as new resources are created and new needs are identified. The Hub could assist in identifying capital and other funding streams. By working with Lee County Public Safety to develop liaisons with the private sector, the Hub can also assist with integrating the private sector into the Emergency Operations Center.

The private sector can contribute to the resilience of the region by taking the initiative to develop effective internal processes and tools for business continuity to enable them to mitigate potential impacts, recover faster, and allow the businesses to contribute to response and recovery efforts. Critically, private sector entities would also contribute to regional resiliency by minimizing downtime and/or quickly recovering to be able to carry out their routine operation that provide essential activities to the community. Considering the different scales of companies, types of business structures, differing needs of sectors of business, and the variety of languages spoken will all be contributing factors to the success of the tools and programs created. Supporting businesses with emergency planning, continuity, and recovery resources can help the community succeed year-round and thrive in the face of disasters.

Key Considerations:

- There are numerous resources available on best practices for business continuity planning. Funding for economic resiliency planning may also be available.
- Creating a liaison with the business community and emergency management is important during blue skies as well as during a disaster.

- Research has shown that creating connections with other businesses and organizations before a disaster strikes makes a community more resilient by ensuring that entities know their response plans and capabilities and that they are invested in supporting each other.
- A robust communication network is critical so that information reaches all facets of the community and relevant government entities.
- Marketing to and educating businesses on support programs like the Foreign Trade Zones (FTZ), Opportunity Zone, HUBZone, and the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund (CDFI) may propel more business to seek assistance and explore business opportunities.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Economic Recovery, Planning and Capacity, Cultural Resources, Education & Workforce, and Health & Social Services

Stakeholders:

- County departmental experts on economic development, public safety, and tourism.
- Municipal government departmental experts on economic development, public safety, and tourism.
- Chambers of Commerce
- Local Port Authority
- CareerSource of Southwest Florida
- Horizon Council
- Local Educational Institutions
- Local business community partners
- Local Industry Associations
- Local hospitality organizations
- Marketing organizations
- Cultural and Arts organizations and institutions in Lee County
- Nonprofit organizations and umbrella groups

Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Small Business Administration
- Department of Homeland Security/FEMA
- United States Department of Treasury
- United States Department of Health and Human Services

- Florida Division of Emergency Management
- Florida Department of Commerce

Resources:

- Library of Congress Small Business Hub
- FloridaMakes Disaster Impacted & Readiness

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