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DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Editorial | City has a blueprint for safety; act on it

Nobody likes to think about a Katrina-sized natural disaster, or a terrorist attack, striking Philadelphia. But the city has taken a commendable, necessary step in preparing for such a crisis.

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A new study commissioned by Mayor Street identifies more than 200 tasks for the city's "to-do list" to ensure the safety of its 1.5 million residents. They range from devising a comprehensive traffic evacuation plan to developing a \$20 million underground communications system that would enable first responders to talk to each other in subway tunnels. Firefighters responding to an underground emergency now might as well shout at each other.

The \$1 million report, released this week, was done by consultant James Lee Whitt, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the Clinton administration. It says Philadelphia isn't ready for a large-scale disaster, but that assessment isn't exactly surprising. No large U.S. city is prepared to handle a New Orleans-style catastrophe.

The point is to have a plan in place before you and your neighbors find yourselves abandoning your cars on an impassable Schuylkill Expressway, or people in wheelchairs are left stranded in the parking lot of the Wachovia Center because nobody had a plan to evacuate them.

City Managing Director Pedro Ramos has it right: This is one report that can't be put on a shelf. One of the most critical needs that surfaces repeatedly is emergency communications. In addition to an underground system, the city's ambulances should be equipped with two-way radios so their crews can talk to hospitals. The huge cost of some of these items will require city officials to ask for help from both Harrisburg and Washington.

A crucial aspect of this study is its emphasis on the importance of the city's working with suburban communities. A regional approach to disaster preparedness is not only a good idea, it is also mandated by the Department of Homeland Security as a requirement for federal funding. It's sadly ironic, then, that the city did not think to invite officials from suburban counties to join in the initial phase of this planning process.

Mutual city-suburban antagonism is a given, but it is also a challenge that must be overcome for the good of all residents.

The city has purchased a plan for coming up with a disaster plan. To make sure that this initial investment was money well spent, the Street administration now must develop a reasonable time frame for implementing these goals, and figure out how to afford all that the city needs to do.

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