
U.S Mayors

Our Cities Are Not Prepared for Disaster

by Pat Salisbury

The official organization of mayors of the United States held a press conference July 26 to issue a chilling report documenting that America's cities are not prepared to survive upcoming disasters, be they natural or man-made. The mayors' conclusions, presented by a bipartisan panel, were released under the title: "Five Years Post 9/11, One Year, Post Katrina: The State of America's Readiness. A 183-City Survey."

Speaking at the press conference were Tom Cochran, executive director of the U.S. Conference of Mayors; Michael A. Guido, mayor of Dearborn, Mich., and president of the group; Martin O'Malley, mayor of Baltimore, Md.; Douglas H. Palmer, mayor of Trenton, N.J.; J. Christian Bollwage, mayor of Elizabeth, N.J.; David G. Wallace, mayor of Sugar Land, Tex.; and John E. Street, mayor of Philadelphia.

The mayors minced no words, and dove right into their findings, placing much of the blame on the Federal government, and virtually begging the assembled press corps to alert the American population.

One of the most startling findings is the documentation of a continuing lack of interoperable communications, the basic ability of first responders to reach and communicate with each other and with relevant public officials, hospital personnel, and other institutions. This lack proved disastrous in both the 9/11 terrorist attack and the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina.

Eighty percent of the cities report that they have not received sufficient Federal funds to achieve full communications interoperability. When asked how far away they are from achieving full communications interoperability, cities reported the following: 40% said "four years" and 60% either were unable to respond or said "unknown." Therefore, not one city is even within reach of achieving this most basic parameter of disaster preparedness.

Several mayors commented on the obstacles to success. Mayor Wallace, a Republican, described the way in which aspects of the communications system put into place, have been delayed by a cutback in Federal funding. He also noted that while many municipalities in his regional area have created a network which is at least partially functional, the city of Houston is not participating. Wallace reported estimates that it would require \$150 million to bring Houston into the net.

Mayor Street, a Democrat, later reported that \$25 million would be required to establish basic communications in the subway system in Philadelphia and the surrounding area.

'Market Forces Will Not Do It'

The study also documented the inabilities of the cities to cope with a bird flu pandemic, given the insane refusal of the Bush Administration to admit Federal responsibility in such an emergency. Seventy percent responded "no" to this question: "The Federal government has already stated that local governments would be largely on their own during the first days and possibly weeks of a pandemic. Is your city prepared to handle such a crisis on its own?"

Mayor O'Malley, a Democrat, elaborated on this point, stating that there is no way any city could be prepared for a bird flu pandemic without the aid of the Federal government. "Market forces will not do it, the profit incentive is not there," he said.

Mayor Street made a similar point, reporting that an in-depth study conducted in the tri-state, 11-county area around Philadelphia had convinced him and other public officials that they remained "woefully unprepared" for an emergency. "I'm telling you we have whole sections of the country that are unprepared," he said, adding that he could not stress forcefully enough that the local taxpayer cannot foot the bill; huge assistance is needed from the Federal government.

During the question and answer session, this *EIR* reporter challenged the mayors to go further and address the fundamental cause of the problem. Summarizing the role of fascist financier Felix Rohatyn in the destruction of urban infrastructure, *EIR* asked them to comment on reversing the Rohatyn policies that caused the infrastructure takedown. Tom Cochran, executive director of the mayors' group, chose to answer this question by making remarks on the importance of infrastructure, and lamenting that there was no climate in Congress or in the population for building infrastructure. He said that he had known Rohatyn when he was U.S. Ambassador to France.

In subsequent discussion with *EIR*, Cochran said Rohatyn had told him that infrastructure development had to be paid for by an increase in the tax on gasoline. He told Rohatyn that would never work, he said.

Cochran and the mayors received copies of the just-completed *EIR* study "Rohatyn Steals Public Property Coast to Coast," which documents Rohatyn's seven-year campaign to win over the Conference of Mayors to the proposition that globalization is here to stay, and that huge chunks of taxpayer-funded urban infrastructure should be "privatized." It is to be hoped that study of this report and proposals by Lyndon LaRouche for Federal infrastructure projects to reverse 30 years of looting and decay, plus constituency pressure, will prod the mayors to make a serious response to LaRouche's call to both parties to rid themselves of Rohatyn and his ilk.