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Florence P. Dwyer

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CONGRESSWOMAN DWYER'S

REPORT TO THE PEOPLE

OF THE UNION-ESSEX SUBURBS



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ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

Nature was not the only culprit responsible for the awesome devastation of last week's "Tropical Storm Agnes."

In a very real sense, blame belongs to all who, in large or small measure, failed to do their part to prepare for the rampages which nature perpetrates all too often.

It's an old story. When public needs or problems are long-term or unglamorous or unproductive of immediate solution, we tend to lose patience and interest. We grow weary of the expense. We tire of the need for sustained effort, attention to detail, mastery of the complex. Boredom and frustration drive us to newer and more exciting pursuits.

It's been like that with government public works programs. Failing to distinguish between those designed primarily for political benefit and those, like flood control, aimed at meeting real needs, we tend to dismiss them all as "pork barrel" projects. Result: delay, endless study, lengthy stretchouts, underfunding -- and too little protection.

THE COST OF FAILURE

So now we're paying for our failures and finding that the cost of substituting slogans for solutions runs high. It almost defies belief that we could have been so unprepared for the heavy rains which, in the absence of adequate detention basins, drainage areas, flood wall, dams and flumes, swept dozens to their deaths, destroyed billions in property, drove hundreds of thousands from their homes, and disrupted essential public services for days.

As I write this report, the full extent of the disaster remains unknown and immeasurable. Miraculously, most of New Jersey -- at least to date -- seems to have been spared the full harshness of the storm. But good fortune, when it's surrounded by others' tragedy, is less a reason for self-congratulation than for self-examination. Somehow, we've got to speed up the process of studying, planning and constructing flood control projects, not only in terms of the Corps of Engineers' responsibilities but also of Congressional authorizations and appropriations and of local approval and cooperation, all of which have been sources of considerable delay.

HERE AT HOME

This year's Public Works Appropriations Bill, which is now under active consideration by the House and Senate, illustrates the problem all too well, especially for North Jersey. Because of difficulties in reaching agreement on a plan, there is nothing in the bill for the Passaic River, for example, and this a river basin which is in serious need of attention.

For the Rahway River basin, victim of three major floods since 1968, the bill includes a piddling \$5,000 to complete the preliminary study of the area's flood control needs -- a study for which I obtained Congressional authorization after the '68 flood. For several weeks now, I have been working with the Administration, House and Senate Appropriations Committees, and Senator Case to obtain an additional \$140,000 which, if we're successful, will gain us a full year in reaching our ultimate goal.

In the case of the Elizabeth River, the bill contains \$3,100,000 which will fund the first major construction of this important \$12 million project. But this comes 12 long years after I obtained the first authorization and appropriation for the original study. I can't believe all this time is really necessary.

HELP IN SIGHT

Senator Case, by the way, has devised a plan which I believe holds great potential for reducing such delays. He has introduced legislation which would de-authorize Corps of Engineers' projects on which too little progress has been made for too long a time. This would, at least, help clear the Corps' decks and allow the Corps to concentrate on active priority projects.

The moral is obvious. When we fail to pay attention to permanent or continuing public needs, we only invite the kind of disaster we have just witnessed.

Inevitably, other applications of this principle suggest themselves -- and none more immediately to my mind than the growing threat to legislation creating a new Department of Community Development, about which I've written on several previous occasions.

The analogy is compelling. As with public works, government organization is not the most gripping of subjects. Public apathy, too little leadership, and the demands of competing interests have been difficult to overcome, to the point where this valuable legislation may well go down the drain.

THE EFFECTS OF DEFEAT

The effects of its defeat could be as damaging to the public interest as last week's flooding, though its dimensions would not be so evident so soon as with the natural disaster. This bill, you may recall, would re-structure a major part of the domestic side of the Executive Branch. By bringing together programs and agencies having related objectives, the reorganization would provide the means for more responsible policy direction, improved administration, greater responsiveness to public needs, more expeditious delivery of public services, and a more effective decentralization of operations, bringing Federal programs closer to the people they benefit and shaping them to local conditions.

All of which sounds, I concede, rather abstract. But when it's your community which needs housing, or parks, or mass transit, these abstract-sounding considerations become very immediate and practical, as any Mayor can tell us.

The DCD bill is one of the President's top three legislative priorities. Few legislative proposals in my 16 years in Congress have undergone such lengthy and detailed study. And when the bill was reported favorably earlier this year by my Government Operations Committee, the vote was encouragingly one-sided.

MOUNTING OPPOSITION

Yet, in the weeks which have followed, opposition to the bill has mushroomed. Three of the most powerful lobbies in Washington have declared war: housing, agriculture, and highways. And they've employed all the tools of their trade: full-page newspaper ads, letter-writing campaigns, personal visits to key Congressmen, among others. A common theme underlies their opposition: fear that their favorite programs will somehow be reduced in status and concern that access to their favorite officials will not be quite so open.

Little has been done, unfortunately, to counter this campaign. No national effort has been mounted to go over the heads of lobbyists and bring the people the facts of reorganization and the value of this bill. While Congressmen appreciate, more than most, the inadequacies of our governmental mechanisms, they need some evidence of support for particular solutions.

One other analogy cries out for mention: gun control. How long must we wait, how many tragedies must we endure before the country, the Congress and the Administration awake to what's happening and what we need to do. An effective firearms licensing and registration system and stricter limitations on the sale of handguns may inconvenience some, but it seems a small price to pay for the greater safety it will bring to many. To the other qualities of leadership required to enact such legislation, we might also add courage.

THE FRUITS OF SUCCESS

To end on a more hopeful note, House passage last week of the Revenue Sharing bill was a triumph of the very qualities we have seen in such short supply in other areas. Success required effort, persistence, detailed knowledge, the willingness to adjust differences, and commitment to an objective clearly in the public interest.

For New Jersey, by the way, the bill -- assuming Senate approval -- will mean an added 179.7 million dollars this year.