

October 30, 2005
Connecticut

Which Way to Go: What's the Plan to Get Out of Town?

By FORD FESSENDEN

Correction Appended

IN an evacuation, New London emergency managers know how many cars are likely to hit the streets on a summer weekend and how many on a winter evening. In Bridgeport, officials have calculated the population of the city's hurricane flood zones and specified which will be moved first in an evacuation, and by what route.

But in Westport, the evacuation plan says simply that the emergency director will "coordinate transportation required for evacuation" and leaves the details moot. Darien's plan similarly calls for "appropriate evacuation routes to protect and move people away from the different types of hazards the town faces," with no elaboration on the potential hazards or the appropriate routes.

[Connecticut](#) vests municipalities with the authority and obligation to figure out how to move residents in a disaster. But a review of some of plans shows wide divergence in the amount of planning that has been done. Most, state officials say, have adopted a bare-bones model that basically details who is in charge and directs them to come up with a plan on the run that fits the emergency.

"Some towns do an excellent job and put a lot of work into it and make it way beyond what you would expect," said Wayne Sandford, deputy commissioner of the State Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. "In other towns, probably the large majority, you're going to find it's the boilerplate language."

At a time when the fear of natural disaster and terrorism is at a peak, state officials have begun to worry about how to move residents out of harm's way. The possibility of a Katrina-like storm is at the forefront, but terror and nuclear accidents are also on people's minds.

At the moment, the state doesn't have its own plan, but relies instead on the municipal plans. Many plans have not only given little detailed thought to what an evacuation would look like within their own community, they also mostly ignore one another, raising the prospect of a free-for-all if disaster affects several municipalities at once.

"Look at Hurricane Rita," Attorney General [Richard Blumenthal](#) said. "Mass flight will create gridlock, and whether it's rational or not, you have to plan for it. We have to learn from these disasters."

Gov. M. Jodi Rell has called on her new Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, along with public-safety and transportation agencies, to come up with the state's first evacuation plan by year's end.

"If, for any reason, we need to evacuate citizens from any part of the state because of a natural disaster or terrorist attack, I want to be certain we have firm blueprints and an actual plan in place," the governor said in a statement. She added, "Nothing should be left to chance."

For now, there is a patchwork of local plans that often make few actual plans.

Darien's document is typical and sounds authoritative: It says that between 5 and 20 percent of its residents will evacuate before being told to do so. Some will refuse no matter what the threat, and many of those will be pet owners, it says. Most will evacuate in their own cars, but some will require vans and buses provided by the authorities. Eighty percent will find shelter in motels or the homes of friends and relatives, but the rest will require mass housing.

All of those specifications, though, are in many other town plans, because they are part of a model plan suggested by the state emergency management agency.

"It's a bare-bones plan that reflects the local needs, does not reflect the regional or statewide needs, and it's not complete in my eyes," said Marc McEwan, the Darien emergency management coordinator. He added in an e-mail message, "Our town officials are currently trying to place more specific information into the plan for an all-hazard evacuation plan."

Some of the state's larger towns have more detailed documents. Bridgeport and New Haven include maps showing flood and hurricane inundation zones. Bridgeport breaks its flood areas into groups for staggered evacuation and indicates streets to be used for moving people to the north. New Haven's plan includes locations and schematic diagrams of schools that can be used as shelters.

But there is a widespread realization that most municipalities are not prepared. "They're very generic and very basic," said Scott Appleby, the emergency director in Bridgeport, of some of the smaller municipalities' evacuation plans. "You have to do something to make sure those towns don't just rely on them, and that they really think them through. The state has to provide something to these smaller towns."

Mr. McEwan, of Darien, said: "I think that's the key. The state should say, 'You're either going to be in the game or you're not, and if not, we're going to do it for you.'"

But Mr. Sandford said the state has no authority to do that.

"The state cannot go in and say you have to change your plan, because it's their plan," he said. Instead, he said, the state will push municipalities to work together with nearby towns to prepare a regional arrangement that can be coordinated and assisted by his office.

"The mayor of New Haven has said he feels confident he can evacuate New Haven, but once I evacuate, I don't know where they will go," Mr. Sandford said. "That's what we need to work on."

Dianne Farrell, the first selectwoman in Westport, acknowledged that the town's plan for evacuation "doesn't go far enough," but said officials have made evacuation plans that aren't in the official document. She said the problem is that "evacuation planning cannot be handled on a strictly local level."

The Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security is a new agency, created on Jan. 1 out of two bureaus that used to be in the Department of

Public Safety and the Military Department. It hopes to solve the evacuation problem by creating a regional planning level as a stand-in for the county governments that Connecticut lacks.

"Most of the towns' local plans look the same," said Melissa Leigh, assistant director of the South Western Regional Planning Agency, 1 of 15 regional planning organizations set up in the 1960's after Connecticut did away with county government. "When they fall apart is when you have a disaster that affects more than one."

Mr. Sandford's paradigm is the small city of New London and surrounding communities. They have the state's most highly developed regional evacuation plan, and the reason is simple.

"If there's such a thing as a benefit to having a nuclear power plant nearby, this is it," said Reid Burdick, the director of emergency management in New London. "We can open a book and know where the cars are going."

Extensive evacuation planning is a prerequisite to the licensing of the Millstone nuclear plant in Waterford, and it has ensured that nearby municipalities coordinate and cooperate.

"We think we will use the Millstone plan as the model we begin with," Mr. Sandford said. "They have primary and alternate routes, and they have host communities pre-identified."

The communities around the Millstone plant also regularly drill on the plan. New London dispatches school buses to simulate student evacuations, packing them, empty, to designated staging areas. Years ago, East Lyme authorities even packed the buses with students and drove them to New Haven, which had agreed to serve as its "host community."

"We don't physically move people any more," said Pearl Rathbun, director of emergency management in East Lyme. "But we have to demonstrate annually that we are capable of warning and moving the public."

Mr. Blumenthal and other officials have also cautioned that events outside the state's borders must be considered as well. Although no Connecticut community is within the 10 mile radius for evacuation planning of the Indian Point nuclear plan in Buchanan, he said he believes people in Connecticut will want to flee.

"We're talking about hundreds of thousands of people not just in New York, but in Connecticut," he said. "There has to be thorough and expert planning and assessment as to how move people out of that area."

Mr. Blumenthal also points out that people fleeing disaster in New York will be moving to and through his state, overwhelming major arteries that are already clogged on a good day.

Although the governor has called for such plans to be ready within three months, officials are already saying they won't make her deadline.

"It will probably take a little bit longer than that," Mr. Sandford said. "It's not going to be done overnight."

Correction: Nov. 6, 2005, Sunday:

A map last Sunday with an article about municipalities' evacuation plans misidentified a river that flows through Bridgeport west of the Pequonnock River. It is the Rooster River, not the Mill River. (The Mill River, which is farther west, was not on the map.)