

June 27, 2017 Researchers Say Resiliency Plan Will Save Future Disaster Dollars

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UVI Researcher Kim Waddell speaks to the need for a territorial Hazard Mitigation and Resiliency Plan.

Every dollar spent on mitigation pre-storm saves about \$6 in post-recovery, University of the Virgin Islands' researchers Greg Guannel and Kim Waddell said Tuesday night as they encouraged residents to give input on a draft Hazard Mitigation and Resiliency Plan for the territory.

If done well, such a plan could "help break the ongoing cycle of disaster damage and reconstruction," Waddell said.

Development of such a plan, which is a joint project between UVI and the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency, is a federal requirement, Waddell said, but really helps state and territories to better comply with legislative policies, procedures and regulations

that often come down in the wake of a storm, when disaster struck areas are dealing with how to manage millions or billions in disaster recovery dollars.

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Additionally, an approved plan will provide the U.S. Virgin Islands with access to federal funding that will support current and future disaster recovery and mitigation efforts, he said. With the frequency of hurricanes and other disasters increasing with environmental changes and other factors, Waddell and other organizers warned that the level of FEMA support received by the territory in the future might not be as much as it has been in the last two years, making planning ahead even more important.

“Hazard mitigation is the effort to reduce loss of life and property by lessening the impact of disasters,” he told the small group gathered Tuesday at the Small Business Development Center on St. Thomas. “Effective mitigation removes the need for such expensive repairs, if done well.”

Before giving group members time to talk on their own, Waddell said the project team had put together a set of guiding principles for the plan that weren’t included in previous ones, such as climate adaptation, social culture and awareness and capacity building. Input from residents in both districts – where experiences, demographics and even cultural history were different – will help build on each principle, making the document more comprehensive and far-reaching.

Showing a set of maps of each island, for example, Waddell spoke about how the areas most prone to flooding in the territory are actually the most populated, and contain critical assets like government buildings, schools and health centers. Planning better drainage and other infrastructure that could reduce that flooding is one factor that should be considered, along with a host of others, he said.

“If we are not preparing for climate change, as another example, then we are also not really planning for the future, and that is what we want to do here. We want to look 30, 50 years down the line, figure out how much the sea level is going to rise, and plan improvements around that. We need to do this if we want the plan to be sustainable and long lasting,” Waddell said.

Tuesday’s meeting was the first of many that will be hosted on the different islands. Working as a team, VITEMA and UVI are also developing professional development opportunities for emergency managers, first responders and technical experts who serve as the territory’s front line against natural and manmade disasters.