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CARRI Community Spotlight

Charleston/Tri-County Area, South Carolina

July 2009

Nearly two years ago, the Community and Regional Resilience Institute (CARRI) partnered with three communities in the southeast to help it understand the characteristics of resilient communities. While the expectation was that the exploration would prove beneficial to the communities themselves, for the engagement effort to be of on-going benefit to the community, local ownership of the process was seen as a crucial step. In January 2009, the Charleston region took that important step by designating a key local organization to lead the resilience effort – the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments (BCDCOG).

The BCDCOG has adopted the focus areas set forth during the CARRI community engagement effort, in particular, ways to make the Tri-County (Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester counties) more resilient in terms of transportation/mobility and communication/information sharing. At all stages of the process, the Tri-County resilience effort has involved the entire fabric of the community, with active participation from the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors of the region. The process itself has engendered new alliances among these sectors.

Long-time Mt. Pleasant Town Administrator Mac Burdette felt so strongly about the importance of the CARRI effort in strengthening the region, he called a meeting in January, inviting leaders from every local government in the Tri-County urging them to pledge their support to the resilience effort and “take ownership in the process.” The response was overwhelmingly favorable with unanimous endorsement to continue the regional effort and designate the BCDCOG as the lead organization. Since then, the plan has been endorsed by the Tri-County CARRI Advisory Group, which is made up of leaders from all sectors of the community, as well as the BCDCOG Board of Directors.

Under the new structure, the BCDCOG is advancing the work of the focus groups initially organized by CARRI. With CARRI’s continued support, the BCDCOG is working to review and implement the strategies set forth by the focus groups. The CARRI Transportation and Mobility Focus Group recommends a future state that would make more transportation modes available in the Tri-County region, as well as offer more diversity in transit options.

The focus group recommends the initial focus be on measures to reduce congestion in the existing transportation system, such as coordinating and automating traffic signals across the Tri-County region. Other measures include expanding the network of rapid transit buses and designating existing lanes for

high occupancy vehicles (HOV) or high occupancy/tolls (HOT). HOT lanes are HOV lanes that can be used by single drivers who pay a fee.

The focus group also recommends working within the Tri-County region to insure linkage of land use and transportation planning. The third recommendation is to use informal mechanisms and commitment of community and jurisdiction leaders to develop a culture of diversified, efficient transportation in the region.

These recommendations were presented to the BCDCOG Board of Directors on June 22, 2009 by BCDCOG Senior Planner Jeff Burns. While no action was taken, the CARRI effort and the BCDCOG's emerging leadership role in it were enthusiastically supported by several leaders in attendance including BCDCOG Executive Director Ron Mitchum; North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey, who chairs the BCDCOG Board of Directors; and Chairman of the Dorchester County Council Larry Hargett, who is vice chair of the BCDCOG Board of Directors and chair of the Regional Land Use Planning Committee. All three are founding members of the regional CARRI Advisory Group. Discussion included the benefits of a CARRI certification for resilience and how it might attach to FEMA reimbursements, insurance and bond ratings.

The board was also briefed on the work and recommendations of the Communication and Information Sharing Focus Group. Those recommendations will be presented in greater detail at the next meeting of the board on August 10, 2009. At this time, the focus group has identified two emerging themes for the desired future state: that official emergency communication networks across the Tri-County region be interoperable, and that plans be in place to feed information from "official" communication systems into mass media and information networks.

From this, a "Soft Communication Focus Group" has been designated to develop more effective partnering with informal community networks and improved integration of nongovernmental and private partners, improved messaging and recovery communication. Leading the effort are Laura Varn, vice president of corporate communications at Santee Cooper; Caroline Byrd, training coordinator for Trident United Way's 2-1-1 Hotline and head of Trident VOAD; and Scott Cave, director of finance, information systems and business continuity for Tele-Tech Services Inc.

The soft communications focus group leadership will meet on July 6, 2009 to build a roster of participants and set a date for an initial meeting in July or August, when the focus group will agree on a general timeline, goals and objectives, and how they plan to communicate.

In addition, a "Hard Communication Task Force" has been formed to develop processes to ensure that critical networks receive priority restoration, protocols for a minimum technology base across the three counties, and a feasibility study for a centralized emergency communications center for the Tri-County region. In April, the advisory group recommended that the first step be a baseline test of the current systems and their interoperability. Administrators from all three counties currently are working with their communications departments to orchestrate a baseline test.