



# Speak Up Iowa! Public Input Final Report

To the Rebuild Iowa Advisory Commission

August 2008





## Introduction

The 2008 disasters devastated businesses, farms, homes, schools, non-profit institutions, entire communities, and people's lives across the state of Iowa. The Rebuild Iowa Advisory Commission (RIAC) is charged by the Governor to guide the state's recovery and reconstruction. To most directly inform the work of the Rebuild Iowa Office, to include public input regarding damage incurred by the disasters, and take suggestions for the rebuilding and recovery effort, Governor Culver established the Speak Up Iowa! public input sessions as a way to hear directly from the public their views on the greatest recovery needs, and suggestions for meeting the needs of Iowans as the state rebuilds safer, stronger, and smarter.

Speak Up Iowa! public input sessions took place in the following locations across the state over three weeks:

- Cedar Rapids, July 31
- Wapello, August 5
- Red Oak, August 11
- Fort Dodge, August 12
- Cedar Falls, August 19

A Speak Up Iowa! booth was also set up at the Iowa State Fair to allow fairgoers to submit their comments. Additionally, an online public input survey was created on the Rebuild Iowa Office website ([www.rio.iowa.gov](http://www.rio.iowa.gov)) to allow Iowans to submit their comments electronically. The sessions hosted many Iowans with questions and with more than 150 Iowans submitting general comments on the affects of local flooding and areas where they would like to see immediate government response.

Speak Up Iowa! public input sessions were staffed by members of the Rebuild Iowa Office. Each of the nine Rebuild Iowa Task Forces were represented at these sessions. Task Forces included Housing, Flood Plain Management and Hazard Mitigation, Infrastructure and Transportation, Economic and Workforce Development, Cultural Heritage and Records Retention, Public Health & Health Care, and Long-term Recovery Planning, Agriculture and Environment, and Education. Members of the Task Force also met separately to discuss at length their particular topics. At the Speak Up Iowa! sessions, each Task Force provided resources and information on topics related to their issue area, and offered an opportunity to the public to make suggestions that would inform the 45-day Task Force Reports. Each Task Force utilized their own input forms for Speak Up Iowa! attendees to provide feedback related to specific issue areas.

The Speak Up Iowa! sessions were attended by individuals and families, community groups, farmers, representatives of non-profit organizations and local government officials and agencies. These events gave



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Iowans an opportunity to express their ideas and visions for rebuilding the state and also to receive specific information from the RIO staff and other entities such as Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Small Business Administration (SBA) on various recovery programs available to those affected. Given the small sampling of Iowans who completed forms, it is important to understand this is a sampling from only a portion of Iowans that participated in events or online.

Governor Chet Culver established the Rebuild Iowa Office (RIO) to oversee the recovery efforts in Iowa. While storms and flooding still continued across the state, Governor Culver appointed Lieutenant Governor Patty Judge to lead the RIO effort and soon after she recruited key staff from state agencies to be a part of the first phase of the recovery process. Executive Order Seven also established the Rebuild Iowa Advisory Commission (RIAC). The Commission was directed to oversee the RIO office and provide reports after 45 days, and again, after 120 days to the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, and General Assembly regarding unmet needs and impacts, immediate recommendations as well as long-term recovery strategies for the state of Iowa.

This report is the product of public input received through Speak Up Iowa! sessions across the state and online, via an electronic survey.



## Executive Summary

The Rebuild Iowa Advisory Commission (RIAC) is charged by the Governor to guide the state's recovery and reconstruction. In order to hear directly from Iowans affected by the floods and storms, Governor Culver established the Speak Up Iowa! public input sessions as part of the larger Rebuild Iowa Office effort to inform the work of the Commission.

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More than 150 Iowans submitted comments at Speak Up Iowa! public input session locations across the state, the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines or electronically via the Rebuild Iowa Website ([www.rio.iowa.gov](http://www.rio.iowa.gov)). Speak Up Iowa! events gave Iowans an opportunity to express their views and visions for rebuilding the state following the natural disasters of 2008.

The general public who provided input through Speak Up Iowa! recommends the following to provide immediate and long-term recovery from the disasters of 2008:

1. Rebuild/Repair and Maintain Levees: It is important to ensure that levees are able to withstand the toughest disasters. While a fool-proof system is almost impossible, detailed studies regarding the design, location, size, etc. of levees across the state is needed. Annual inspection and maintenance of levees is also required.



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2. Dredging: Many attendees also suggested dredging as an option. While some argue that dredging may cause environmental side effects, many supported this as an option to consider for areas where environment effects can be minimized.
3. Expedite Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Buyouts Program: As the winter season approaches, the state should ensure that those in the affected floodplain zones are able to sell their properties and move to housing in zones outside the floodplain. Greater attention needs to be given to low-income individuals and households.
4. One-Stop-Shop: Attendees expressed frustrations regarding different information they were receiving for the same questions from agencies. Many suggested the benefit of having one place where people can receive information and have representatives who can take their questions, give correct answers, or find out the answer and get the information that they need.
5. Early Warning Systems: There is a need to develop accurate warning systems that alert the public to possible disasters and the severity of those disasters.
6. Work closely with small towns and rural Iowa: Attendees expressed a strong need for the government to pay particular attention to small towns and rural Iowa as attendees feel that these communities are the core of Iowa.
7. Mental Health Services: In order to ensure that Iowa communities and employees remain healthy, the state needs to ensure that there are enough organizations and agencies that provide mental health services.
8. Build Safer, Stronger, and Smarter: State should place greater importance to comprehensive planning that addresses environmental needs and restores Iowa's native landscape.
9. Rebuild Public Confidence: Besides helping families overcome hurdles, there is also a greater need to rebuild the public's morale and support a sense of community. People are dealing with emotional as well as physical losses and may not feel that communities can rebuild again to pre-flood levels.



## **Impacts of Floods and Disasters as Expressed by Speak Up Iowa! Respondents**

Those who attended the Speak Up Iowa! sessions reiterated similar themes that were presented in many of the Task Force and Commission meetings - extensive damages to houses and major disruptions in daily lives. People lost their homes, their assets, and crucial records, among other necessities. Of the records that cannot be replaced, these include pictures, diplomas, vital documents, and memorabilia. Besides damage to homes, the disasters of 2008 damaged people's livelihoods especially for small business owners and farmers. One responder lost his home, his hog building, and 1,000 acres of crop land. Another farmer lost all of his farm equipment. Disasters have also left elderly and fragile families weak and helpless. Some families that had put all their savings and income towards paying off their mortgages are now left with no homes. Families such as these need to rebuild but lack the means or the capacity to begin the rebuilding process.

Many Iowans, such as the elderly and persons with disabilities, are on the edge of survival. Numerous Iowans have little or no back-up plans to recover. Comments such as "I do not have a home to go to, I am tired of living out of a suitcase and tired of being treated like a charity case" adequately reflect the severity of the situation and the urgency the disasters of 2008 have caused. Residents of small towns are also feeling that bigger cities such as Cedar Rapids are receiving all the attention and the needs of small towns are being ignored.

Besides severely impacting the well-being and health of individuals and families, the floods and other disasters of 2008 have also disrupted communal and social ties. Small towns have especially lost their "sense of community". One attendee mentions that his community structure and balance will forever be altered due to the aftermath of the floods. Families may lose their friends, neighbors, and relatives. Churches and other community groups may lose members. One Oakville resident points out, "Oakville was like a big family community. Now everyone is scattered to different communities. People are hurting and angry at having lost their houses. The town is split between those wanting to stay and those wanting to move to higher ground."

People are facing insecurities about their future. They are not sure if and how they will be able to rebuild. As one attendee put it, "the community wealth is negatively affected by the floods." Another mentions, "our greatest loss in my eyes is the sense of security and now that people have been forced to find homes somewhere else, many of us will not rebuild or be back."

A major cause of frustration for people is lack of public assistance from the government both at the local, state and federal level. If they do correspond with government officials, they receive differing answers for the same questions. There is a lack of consistent response from the disaster recovery officials. One attendee mentions that she has received two different answers for the same question from the employees



of the same agency. People's uncertainty about when assistance is going to come is also pushing them to move out of communities to different locations.

Many have already moved out of their communities and there are no signs of some coming back. This raises the question of the sustainability of communities. As people relocate, towns lose portions of their tax base. Lack of a continuous stream of tax revenue can lead to the breakdown of infrastructure and deterioration of communities. Residents also fear of the disasters recurring. One attendee mentions, "I am afraid the residents will not be coming back because of the fear of it happening again." Another attendee expressed similar view: "living in fear is not something to take lightly."

Disasters have severely damaged the state infrastructure system. Counties such as Louisa, Jones, and Linn have had disruptions in their waste and sewage systems, telephone lines, electricity, community buildings, businesses, churches, and other essential community entities. More importantly, transportation infrastructure has been severely affected, and this disruption has upended individuals and businesses. Insufficient transportation is harming businesses' product delivery systems as well as individuals' ability to get to their work sites. One attendee's account notes, "the city of Oakville was under water and many houses were a total loss and many streets and roadways were washed away." Another Iowan puts it, "my neighborhood was wiped out." Many Iowa communities are turning into "ghost towns" as people are moving out and there are no businesses to keep the communities alive.

Disasters have also impacted Iowa's cultural, tourism, and recreational industry. In Burlington, Civic Auditorium was flooded. In Cedar Rapids, besides significant flood impacts on housing, the city lost its public structures, such as the library and various historical and cultural buildings. In Cedar Rapids and elsewhere, apart from businesses and individuals being impacted, non-profits are affected and many of them operating on a single line of credit. The famous Bohemia Historical District and Czech Village in Cedar Rapids is completely destroyed as a result of flooding.

Iowans are also expressing concerns regarding public health. One Iowan comments, "Around half or close to half of the people that lived in town and in the surrounding area around Oakville now are not returning. It is not safe, the ground was contaminated, our water supply will always be questionable, and what is left behind in the air or soil, it is not worth getting sick." One attendee notes that the long-term effects of flooding will include mental health issues, substance abuse, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and other readjustment affects. Many others listed that they have been mentally and emotionally drained trying to rebuild their lives.

The education of school-age children has also been affected by the floods and storms. While trying to rebuild communities, attention has been diverted from the well-being of children, especially children from low-income families. A representative from the Boy's and Girl's Club of Cedar Rapids notes that she does not know where the children who attended the Club are currently. The floods have disturbed their



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afterschool routine. Taylor Elementary School in Linn County has been completely shut down. One attendee at the Speak Up Iowa! noted that 65 percent of the Taylor students were displaced as a result of the floods. A manager at the Hawkeye Community Action Program, Inc. noted that in Linn County 11 child care centers had major damages due to the floods and over 1,400 children have had child care impacted. Children are being torn apart from their friends and are likely to face long-term mental health effects of flooding. One online respondent fears that “brain drain” might occur in his community. He fears that many of the next generation, especially the best, brightest, and highly educated, will want to leave the city because of the uncertainties arising from the recent disasters.



## **Issues Presented to Rebuild Iowa Task Forces at Speak Up Iowa! Sessions**

Each of the nine Rebuild Iowa Task Forces were represented at all Speak Up Iowa! public input sessions. Task Forces included Housing, Flood Plain Management and Hazard Mitigation, Infrastructure and Transportation, Economic and Workforce Development, Cultural Heritage and Records Retention, Public Health & Health Care, and Long-term Recovery Planning, Agriculture and Environment, and Education. Each Task Force provided resources and information on topics related to their issue area, and offered the opportunity for the public to make suggestions that would inform the 45-day Task Force Reports. Each Task Force utilized their own input forms for Speak Up Iowa! attendees to provide feedback related to their specific issue area.

### **Agriculture and Environment**

Iowans expressed experiencing a loss in crop production and farming equipment. Many emphasized that the damages in infrastructure such as transportation and storage facilities are increasing liabilities. One Iowan mentioned that the entire watershed needs to be studied to see if development north of Iowa is causing severe flooding along rivers flowing south. Iowans emphasized the need to have less concrete-based construction and more green space. There is also a need to invest in clean water, air, and land. They encouraged the need to support diverse crops and help transition farmers to crops that do not impact the soil negatively. Iowans also suggested that farmers should be educated in sustainable agricultural practices that maintain soil quality and control soil erosion and run-offs.

### **Economic and Workforce Development**

Iowans indicated that adequate financial support should be given to companies to ensure that they do not move out of communities. Economic opportunities should also be provided to the best and the brightest in the state to ensure that they do not move out of Iowa to take jobs elsewhere. Many suggested that the state should support businesses that can create jobs or will help with the rebuilding process.

### **Education**

Iowans expressed strong concerns regarding child care facilities. Many felt that as communities recover, there will be a shortage of child care providers, especially since many of the existing facilities have flooded. People commenting specifically on the Education Task Force feel that the issue of child care is being overlooked. As the demand for child care increases, government should ensure that the child care facilities are at least maintained to the pre-disaster levels. Iowans also expressed that the state should work towards meeting the needs of children zero to five years of age that have been traumatized by the disasters. As part of long-term recovery, the state should also invest in the early childhood system. Additionally, as general hazard mitigation recommendations, Iowans also suggested the need to invest in a statewide emergency response system and mass communication disaster team that uses loudspeakers,



flyers, leaflet posters, town meetings, newspapers, among other tools as possible means to relay flood and/or other natural disaster warnings and carry the state's outreach efforts.

## **Floodplain Management**

Iowans mentioned that there is an immediate need to have more funding available to create and maintain buffer systems, levee rebuilding and other floodplain management systems. There is also a need to review long-term land use plans and policies. Another Iowan mentioned that green spaces need to be established along the river corridors to allow the river to flood without damaging homes and businesses. The state needs to look at the overall land usage in the state, establish green buffers and corridors to contain and infiltrate run off, rather than have continuous cornfields from border to border. One Iowan added, "the government should mandate the use of floodplain zones to be used specifically for parks and recreational areas."

## **Housing**

Iowans strongly expressed the need to have affordable housing and buy-out programs for flooded neighborhoods so that low-income families can afford housing. People who commented emphasized the need to build green which includes green space and green housing that will minimize the impact of natural disasters in the future. Many added that emphasis should also be placed on the need to establish a good public transportation system.

## **Infrastructure and Transportation**

Iowans mentioned that rural roads and highway systems were severely impacted by the floods of 2008. Flooding has accentuated the need for more conservation practices along the roadways and investment in green space. Flooding also exacerbated the issue of public transportation. Many mentioned that getting to and from places was difficult and in many instances impossible. This limited people's options to seek help and get to disaster assistance sites, get back to job sites, or move to safer grounds. Iowans are emphasizing that as Iowa rebuilds, a sustainable and efficient public transportation system should be given high priority. Lastly, local people should be employed in infrastructure rebuilding. One Iowan suggested the use of national standards such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System in public building constructions. The government can offer incentives for private entities that meet the LEED standards.

## **Long-Term Recovery**

People who made comments on Iowa's long-term recovery felt that this is a great opportunity to revitalize Iowa. As Iowa recovers, the public needs to be educated in the role they play in rebuilding. State should do more to involve the public to ensure that they are educated about the causes and impacts of natural disasters and steps they can take to minimize damages such as elevating their houses, if they are located in a floodplain zone. Iowans also emphasized the need to clarify the roles of different agencies in the recovery process, and utilize existing organizations to their full capacities before new organizations are



created. Iowans also mentioned that the decision-making process should be expedited so that people receive the help now when the needs are the greatest and most immediate.

### **Public Health and Health Care**

Iowans mentioned the need to use disasters as a teaching tool in schools and to teach students not just the causes and effects of natural disasters, but steps they can take to mitigate hazards and prepare before a disaster strikes, as well. Iowans also emphasized that the state should be prepared to handle the mental health cases that will appear in the upcoming months that may not be evident now. The state should also ensure that there is sufficient insurance coverage to meet the need for physical and mental health services following the disasters.

### **Cultural Heritage and Records Retention**

Iowans felt that the loss of community attractions will impact business recruitment in the long-term. As cultural attractions generally add to the quality of life, maintaining existing and new cultural attractions should be a long-term priority for the state.



## Speak Up Iowa! Recommendations

While government officials have the right intentions to provide services to the public as efficiently as possible, people who reside in the disaster areas have a unique perspective and first-hand experience. Speak up Iowa! participants suggested various steps that they believe will meet the present disaster needs and will also prevent major damages from occurring with future natural disasters.

1. **Rebuild/Repair and Maintain Levees:** As levees are rebuilt, it is important to ensure that they are able to withstand the toughest disasters. While a full-proof system is almost impossible, detailed studies regarding the design, location, size, etc. of the levees is needed. Additionally, just building levees should not be sufficient. Annual inspection and maintenance of levees is required so that they consistently provide protection for future flooding. An attendee recommended developing a comprehensive plan for a levee system that runs from Minneapolis to New Orleans. It is important to ensure that the state takes a holistic approach to the planning and designing of levees. In order to achieve this, governments must properly fund levees and drainage districts not only for the construction period but also for future maintenance. Another attendee suggested that levees should be put 100 to 300 feet away from the river banks so there is a buffer between the rivers and levees. The government should work with the federal government to properly fund levee programs.
2. **Dredging:** Many attendees also suggested dredging as an option. While some argue that dredging may cause environmental side effects, many supported this as an option to consider for areas where environment effects can be minimized.
3. **Expedite Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Buyouts Program:** One of the greatest needs caused by the flood is immediate availability of sufficient housing. As the winter season approaches, state should ensure that residents in floodplain zones are able to sell their properties and move to housing outside the floodplain zones. Greater attention needs to be paid to those with low-income. Low-income families are usually the ones to settle in floodplain areas because they can find affordable homes in those regions. Therefore to ensure that low-income families are moved out the floodplain zones, affordable housing should be available for them. One attendee mentioned that it is critical to include low-income Iowans in the planning process since they are the ones who suffer the most in times of disasters.
4. **One-Stop Shop:** Attendees at the Speak Up Iowa! public input sessions expressed frustrations regarding different information they were receiving for the same questions from agencies. One attendee mentioned that he received two different answers from officials of the same agency. Therefore, one place where people can receive information and that has agency representatives on-hand is needed. There is also a need to reach out to people instead of waiting for people to seek help.



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5. **Early Warning Systems:** Many attendees expressed frustrations at not being warned of the disasters beforehand. There is a need for accurate warning systems that warn the public about possible impacts of a disaster before effects are seen. Therefore, there is a need for a statewide warning system.
6. **Work Closely With Small Towns:** Attendees expressed a strong need for the government to pay particular attention to small towns and the rural Iowa. Since small towns are sometimes not in the best position to rebuild due to lack of adequate resources, they are in particular need for government assistance.
7. **Mental Health Services:** As people begin recovering from the immediate effects of flooding they will be faced with mental health issues. In order to ensure that Iowa communities and employees stay healthy, state needs to ensure that there are enough organizations and agencies to provide needed mental health services.
8. **Build Safer, Stronger, Smarter:** The public expressed the desire for comprehensive planning to be particularly considerate to the environment and restoring Iowa's native landscape. Many blame the excessively altered Iowa landscape as the cause of severe weather damage. Emphasis should be given to Iowa waterways which have been sidelined over the years as well as land management.
9. **Rebuild Public Confidence:** Besides helping families overcome hurdles in the recovery process, there is also a significant need to rebuild the public's morale and support a sense of community. People are dealing with emotional as well as physical losses and may not feel that communities can rebuild again to pre-flood levels.





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