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Final Report

Project Title:

Teaching Case Studies on Earthquake Preparedness Efforts in the Transportation Sector, Los Angeles Metropolitan Area

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Problem Addressed:

Through the development of a Harvard Kennedy School case study (intended for use as curriculum in graduate-level and executive education programs), this project examines earthquake preparedness and planning processes in the Los Angeles metropolitan region— specifically in connection to the area’s transportation network. By providing an in-depth description of how regional transportation and emergency management authorities planned and otherwise prepared for dealing with a high-consequence hazard (the US Geological Service has determined that southern California is overdue for an extremely powerful earthquake), the case enables students of public policy and administration to examine critical pre-event emergency management functions and to improve their ability to deal with similar challenges in their future professional work.

Research Approach and Methodology:

The methodology employed by the research team (composed of the project’s principal investigator and a researcher/writer) followed the standard Harvard Kennedy School case-development process. The team first collected and assessed information from government reports, news accounts, and other documents concerning earthquake-related planning and other preparedness efforts by surface transportation agencies in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The researchers also conducted semi-structured, elite interviews with municipal and regional officials responsible for these issues. They then analyzed data from the literature assembled and interview transcripts, determined the main thematic issues, and developed a case outline. The case writer then drafted the case under the supervision of the principal investigator.

Research Findings/Conclusions/Recommendations:

The case looks at how, following the release of updated government reports indicating the seriousness nature of the earthquake threat in the Los Angeles area, transportation and emergency management officials prepared for responding and recovering from a seismic event with the potential to cause significant numbers of casualties and inflict serious economic losses. It opens by providing background information about the country’s second largest metropolitan region (giving particular attention to its transportation network) and overviews the nature of the earthquake threat in southern California. The core of the case focuses on the initiatives officials undertook to deal with the looming threat (e.g., developing and revising plans, organizing and participating in exercises, and partnering with relevant stakeholders) – and highlights associated accomplishments as well as key challenges. The case raises important points about planning for worst-case scenarios, the complexities of instituting such plans within the context of large metropolitan networks, and the need for multi-jurisdictional coordination among neighboring communities and between different levels of government.