



CASE STUDY

Building Community Strength through Recovery

TOWN OF LYONS, COLORADO: 2013 FLOODING

Learning Objective: Review and analyze a small town’s approach to managing a complex recovery while maintaining open communication, transparency, and flexibility with the whole community.

Keywords: Recovery, Flood, Severe Storm, Local Government, Recovery Planning, Community Engagement, Capacity Building, Psychological and Emotional Recovery, Mutual Aid, Education Systems

PART ONE

Background

On September 9, 2013, a major storm front stalled over Colorado, dumping a record-breaking 18 inches of rain across the Rocky Mountains over a week, in an area that typically receives 14 inches of precipitation annually. That rain landed on the tens of thousands of mountainous acres that drain into the St. Vrain watershed, at the base of which sits the town of Lyons (population 2,035).

The Town of Lyons is a tight-knit community with a rich history, located on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Boulder County, Colorado. The town was incorporated in 1891 with sandstone quarrying as its main industry. Two forks of the St. Vrain River, the North St. Vrain Creek and South St. Vrain Creek, flow down from the mountains on either side of Lyons. The town is often considered “the gateway to the Rocky Mountains” because of its proximity to Rocky Mountain National Park. A portion of the downtown area is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a Designated Historic District for the prominent use of local red sandstone as a featured building material.

As the waters rose through town the night of the September 11, the town administrator, Victoria Simonsen, left her home and family and drove across the lone bridge leading into the town center in order to post herself at the town hall/fire station. As the waters breached the first floor of the building, she and one other staff scrambled to lift the town records to higher storage locations before fleeing, upon realizing the water outside was above the windows. Due to these efforts, historic town records dating back to the 1800s were saved from the flooded town hall.

The St. Vrain River completely inundated Lyons, stranding all residents on six “islands” of higher ground. Residents were



Figure 1. The Lyons Redstone Museum was damaged in the 2013 floods, but was later restored. Originally the schoolhouse in Lyons, the museum now preserves the town’s heritage through exhibits, photographs, and genealogy records. Source: Lyonscolorado.com



Figure 2. Lyons’ historic Train Depot was damaged by the 2013 floods, but was fully restored by 2016. Source: Lyonscolorado.com

trapped without food, water, sewer, electricity, gas, or communication methods for 36 hours. The National Guard sent helicopters and high-water vehicles to evacuate residents.

Approximately 20 percent of the local housing stock was destroyed, and essential town infrastructure and functions were severely damaged, including the town hall, historic library, public works building, all park facilities, and utilities. The river did not subside for nearly two weeks. Residents were unable to return to their homes for an additional month, as the main roads, water lines, and sewer lines to the town needed significant repairs. The incident significantly impacted the 133 businesses operating in Lyons, 97 percent of which are independently owned. Business owners could not re-open for over two months due to the lack of access into the community and major infrastructure repairs, and the high number of displaced residents meant fewer customers once their doors re-opened.

Challenges

Impacts to the town-run electric distribution system impeded town staff members' communication and coordination efforts when the waters subsided to safer levels. Town officials selected the elementary school as the best intermediate shelter location, but town residents found the building locked since there was no formal agreement to use the school district facilities in an emergency. A janitor had to be contacted to manually open the doors and allow access into the school. The school gym was set up as a base for emergency operations in the first weeks after the incident.

Six weeks after the incident, around when the road and water lines into town were re-opened, FEMA Community Planning and Capacity Building (CPCB) staff arrived in Lyons through an invitation from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) and Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (DHSEM). The CPCB team encouraged town staff to focus on long-term recovery planning early-on. Like many communities following a disaster, Lyons officials were primarily focused on returning residents to their homes quickly and were hesitant to jump into a recovery planning process with so many tasks needing their attention in the days and weeks ahead.

How would the small 14-person team of Lyons officials manage the development of a long-term recovery strategy while simultaneously helping thousands of residents return to their homes, facilitating the reopening of businesses and recreational facilities, and restoring major infrastructure systems?

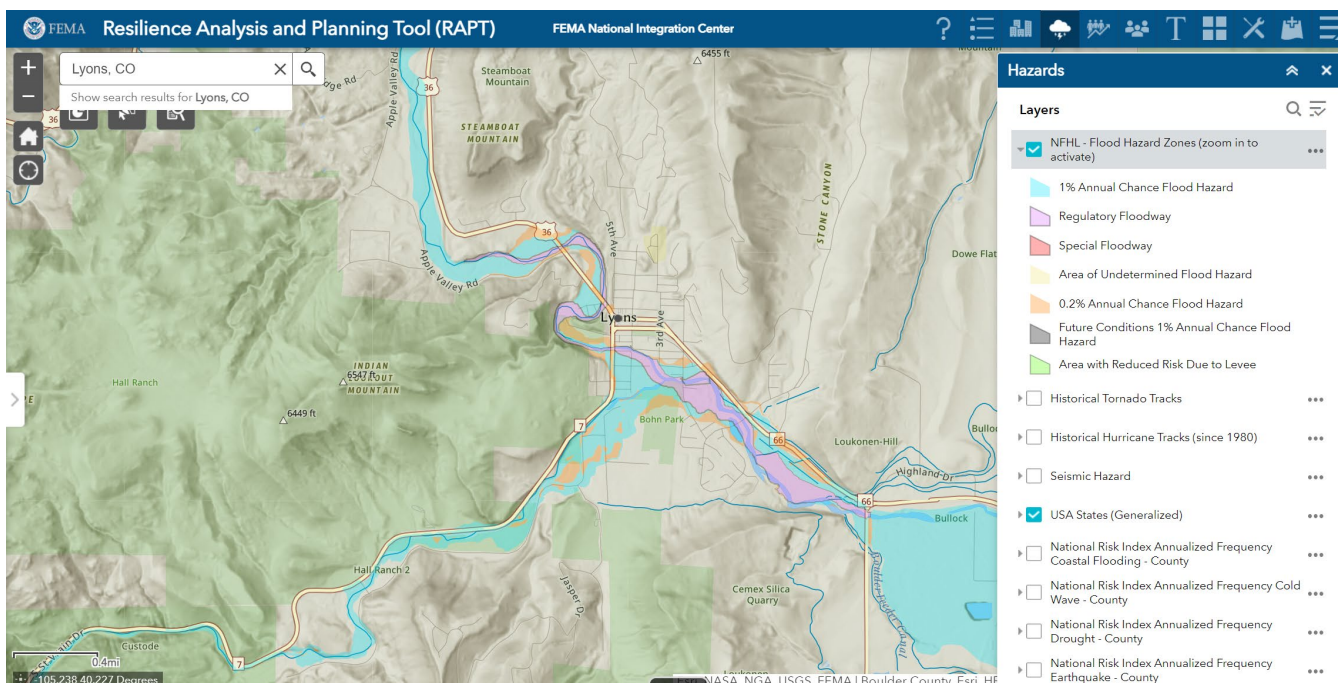


Figure 3. Lyons sits directly to the east of the Rocky Mountains where the north and south St. Vrain Creeks join one another. The blue and purple shading indicate flood zones as defined by the National Flood Insurance Program. Source: FEMA Resilience Analysis and Planning Tool.

PART TWO

Actions

In the first few days following the flood, neighbors held communal barbecues, which served a dual purpose of both comforting and uniting community members as well as cooking food that would have otherwise spoiled while waiting for water and power services to be restored. Every morning, local officials used Sandstone Park to give residents and business owners updates on debris removal and response efforts. Though it was a challenge for everyone to hear each other given the lack of microphones and large crowds, these in-person updates served as a point of connection between concerned residents, town staff, and emergency response personnel.

The neighboring City of Longmont, which was a larger town with greater resources and funding reserves, became an essential partner in Lyons' recovery. A resident shelter, temporary Lyons government office spaces, and even school facilities were established in Longmont, so school-aged children from Lyons were able to resume their classes with their own teachers in extra space provided by the city. This provided a feeling of normalcy and stability to families that otherwise may have had to leave the area. Longmont, along with another neighboring town, Westminster, also loaned staff to Lyons to increase the town's response capacity. Several local water authorities, including Denver Water, Aurora Water, and Arvada Water provided staff to work on restoring water and wastewater utility infrastructure and services. This community network provided localized mutual aid to Lyons.

Lyons' Recovery Working Groups (RWGs)

- Housing
- Stream Recovery
- Public Facilities
- Infrastructure
- Parks and Recreation
- Arts, Culture, and Historic Preservation
- Business and Economic Development
- Health and Human Services

The Colorado Recovery Symposium, held in November 2013, was an opportunity for impacted local officials from across the state to come together and learn about recent lessons learned from recovery efforts across the region. Lyons officials noted that the Symposium speakers from local governments impacted by other disasters helped set expectations about the timelines required for recovery, which was especially helpful. Partially due to the encouragement from state agencies and the FEMA CPCB team, town staff held a kickoff meeting for Lyons' long-term community recovery planning process on December 18, 2013, at LifeBridge Church in Longmont. Eight Recovery Working Groups (RWGs) were

formed with members from the public, town administration, and liaisons from each of Lyons' 10 Boards and Commissions, including the Lyons Board of Trustees, the Lyons Sustainable Futures Commission, and the Planning and Community Development Commission.

Each RWG was tasked with identifying issues, developing solutions, and proposing potential recovery projects within their assigned topic area. FEMA and DOLA provided facilitation support and technical assistance for the RWGs. The RWGs met once per week for six weeks, from January 13, 2014 to February 24, 2014. In total, the eight RWGs produced 57 potential recovery projects for the town and community to consider. Each project was further developed in a Project Development Guide (PDG), a comprehensive questionnaire that details project goals, implementation strategies, and expected outcomes. FEMA CPCB staff helped compile the PDGs into a Community Recovery Implementation Table to compare and balance recovery needs with the town's existing goals and plans, ensuring the recovery goals coincided with the community's Comprehensive Plan. Lyons Administrators note that the FEMA CPCB team became like town staff to them, challenging and supporting the town to tackle the difficult questions that needed to be asked despite competing daily needs.

RWG Work Process

- Week 1: Training
- Week 2: Issue Identification
- Week 3: Idea Generation
- Week 4: Project/Program Refinement
- Week 5: Lyons Recovery Planning Exchange
- Week 6: Complete Project Descriptions

From this effort, the Lyons Recovery Action Plan was born. The public had multiple opportunities to engage in the process including through weekly working groups, community-wide meetings, public hearings, online discussion forums, social media posts, and an interactive recovery website. Local leadership prioritized transparency throughout the recovery process by opening all meetings to the public and widely advertising all meetings through

door-to-door flyers and other methods. Meetings were videotaped for later access on the recovery website along with any additional meeting materials.

Hazard mitigation was a central theme throughout the rebuilding and recovery process, especially during the creation of the Recovery Action Plan. The Sustainable Futures Commission placed liaisons within the RWGs to ensure sustainability and resilience were considerations in all potential project plans and led a comprehensive analysis of all recovery projects to determine their potential impacts on sustainability.

Results

The town began implementing the projects in the Recovery Action Plan in April 2014, directly after its adoption. The town formed a Steering Committee from the Chairs of each of the town's Boards and Commissions. By assigning a responsible party to each recovery action, the plan fostered accountability and credibility. Residents knew exactly who to go to if they were concerned about any aspect of the Recovery Action Plan's implementation.

Local businesses also pitched in to boost community morale and aid in recovery efforts. The sandstone quarrying and excavation businesses loaned heavy equipment to the town in the immediate aftermath of the flood, providing traffic cones and even large excavation vehicles to block off perilous roads that needed to be closed to prevent residents from driving off cliffs before major repairs could begin. Local brewery Oskar Blues formed the Longmont-based CAN'd Aid Foundation to contribute funds and resources such as cases of water to affected local residents. Though the organization was started as a direct result of the 2013 flood, as of late 2018, CAN'd Aid has raised over \$3.4 million and donated over one million cans of water to support disaster response and recovery efforts across the nation.

The restoration of LaVern M. Johnson Park was a major success for local community members. The restored park contains picnic areas with shelter facilities, RV and tent campgrounds, playgrounds, whitewater rafting, and an ice rink in the winter months. It was the first town park to reopen following the flood event, and it provided a gathering space for residents to rebuild their community and boost morale in the midst of ongoing recovery efforts. The name of the park was special to the community. LaVern Johnson is a lifetime Lyons resident and community activist who is responsible for recording much of the town's history and pushing major initiatives such as adding a one percent sales tax to fund town parks and saving the local high school from closure. Several other community-driven projects also contributed to the mental and emotional recovery of town residents:

- *Through Our Eyes*. A publication of stories from elementary-age students at Lyons Elementary School.
- *Our Town, Our Story: The Lyons Flood of 2013*. A publication of stories and images produced by Lyons High School Digital Photography students.
- *Music*. Stories and music brought the people together as they were recovering. Several songs have been written about the flood experience, and there is also a library of verbal stories recorded about peoples' experiences.
- *Clarifier Community Project*. Public art piece constructed in the middle of the floodway. Art piece is a mosaic, designed to represent the four seasons, the two rivers, and the planets, and is constructed with broken pieces of items damaged in the 2013 flood, all contributed by local residents.
- *Lyons, Colorado Rebrand: We've Got Grit!* Town re-branding effort funding by the CDBG-DR Program.



Figure 4. The Clarifier Community Mosaic, which was dedicated in September 2015. Source: clarifierproject.net.

As of fall 2019, the Town of Lyons was still holding weekly meetings to discuss recovery progress and evaluate remaining initiatives in the recovery plan, demonstrating the long-term impact a disaster of this scale can have on a

small community. In addition, the Lyons Recovery Action Plan has continually been used and referenced in council meetings, town staff meetings, and other planning forums as a guidebook for the community's priorities and growth. This document is shared with other small communities to provide ideas and guidance for recovery.

Lessons Learned

- The town's deeply rooted sense of community, social trust, and high value placed on inclusivity and transparency drove the planning process, leading to recovery outcomes town members could support and be proud of.
- Public participation gave residents an outlet through which to share their stories and contribute to the long-term recovery vision for their community.
- Starting the long-term recovery planning process early in disaster operations can provide hope to residents, showcasing forward-looking leadership in a critical, stressful time for the community.
- Messaging and communications are key to managing public expectations. Engaging with media on community-driven projects can keep recovery at the forefront, even after cameras move on to the next story.

Additional Resources

- [Flood Recovery Resources | Lyons, CO \(townoflyons.com\)](#)
- [Colorado United Recovery Symposium Overview - Floods of 2013](#)
- [Boulder County CDBG-DR Action Plan](#)
- [FEMA Community Recovery Management Toolkit](#)
- [Times-Call: Lyons Matriarch LaVern Johnson Reflects on Lifetime of Town Advocacy](#)
- [Oskar Blues and the CAN'd Aid Foundation](#)
- [IRC Case Studies](#) – *Rebuilding Substantially Damaged Homes: Town of Lyons, Colorado 2013 Flooding; Leveraging Financial Resources: Town of Lyons, Colorado 2013 Flooding; Colorado Watershed Coalitions; Colorado Recovery Symposium*