

Local

# GRADD pilot agency for infrastructure disaster mitigation plan

✎ By James Mayse Messenger-Inquirer

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The Green River Area Development District has been selected to be the pilot for a state and federal project, where regional agencies will identify vulnerabilities to critical infrastructure such as water utilities, power companies, communications and transportation.

GRADD officials are partnering with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the state to create an "infrastructure resilience planning framework" that will help elected officials prioritize threats to utilities and essential services. The intent is to create a model for infrastructure disaster planning that can be replicated by other communities.

Blake Edge, GRADD's community development director, said in an email that the idea for the pilot project came from the experience of a nursing home in Puerto Rico, where residents died after Hurricane Maria struck in 2017. Edge said the nursing home had disaster supplies and backup power in place but did not have a plan to replace bottled oxygen that was destroyed in the hurricane.

The infrastructure resiliency plan will focus on how critical infrastructure would continue to function after a disaster. For example, Edge said, the study could examine how a community's wastewater utility would continue operating if it lost its regular supplier of chlorine, or how a water utility would supply water if its own transmission abilities were knocked out.

"Our wastewater treatment plant has suppliers they depend on to operate," Edge said in a Tuesday interview. "They depend on electric, they depend on water ... they depend on chlorine to treat (wastewater). What we are studying is, if something happens to our chlorine (supply), what would the plant do to continue to treat water for the citizens of Owensboro?"

"We are studying how everything is tied together," Edge said.

Officials with utilities across the region will be asked to identify such vulnerabilities. The plan will be integrated into the GRADD's hazard mitigation plan, a document that is updated every five years that regional governments must ratify in order to receive federal disaster assistance.

GRADD Director Jiten Shah was approached by officials about conducting the pilot while at a meeting in Washington, Edge said.

"They had seen our hazard mitigation plan, and they wanted to study how infrastructure depends on one another," Edge said.

The idea behind the plan is that, when the information is compiled, local officials will be able to use it to make decisions on how to spend funds to reduce the risk to critical infrastructure, and to give officials an understanding on how critical infrastructure is dependent on utilities, suppliers, pipelines, transmission lines and communication to function.

"We are trying to reduce the costs of disasters and also help public officials make better-informed decisions," Edge said.

In a prepared statement, Scott McConnell, press secretary at CISA, said: "The objective of the pilot is to increase the value of an update to the region's Hazard Mitigation Plan, with the goal of reducing repetitive losses due to natural hazards. In addition to assisting GRADD, the project also has the goal of developing a process for applying a resilience perspective to hazard mitigation planning that can be replicated across the state.

"CISA values the professionalism of the GRADD and the opportunity to test and improve tools intended to help the public and private sector reduce the risk of cascading consequences of any natural hazard or human threat by considering the dependencies of water, health and other services on critical infrastructure systems such as electricity and communications."

Nick Grinstead, the state's hazard mitigation planner, said while individual utilities have emergency plans of their own, the pilot is a deeper look at infrastructure resiliency.

"This is not reinventing the wheel," Grinstead said. "This is a level of analysis that has not been done before.

"The point of a mitigation plan, and the point of this pilot project, is to prioritize funding sources" for mitigating hazards to important infrastructure, Grinstead said.