

How Difficult Times Can Spotlight Strong County Government.

Late in the afternoon on a muggy summer day, the lights went out in Medina County. It was August the 14th, and it marked the nation's worst blackout, impacting an estimated 50 million people across eight states and Ontario, Canada.

During this blackout, which varied in our county from a few minutes to several hours, a new level of statewide cooperation was tested with the activation of the Ohio Fire Chief's Association Mutual Aid Plan for the sharing of equipment and personnel from communities. This plan combined with the Ohio Intra-state mutual aid compact (IMAC) sent 35 water tankers and fire personnel into Cuyahoga County to provide water for firefighting as water pressure was lost with the loss of electric to pumping stations. Even though we had our own blackouts to deal with across our county and the resulting concerns, our problems were not as extensive as our neighboring counties. Medina County officials pulled it all together taking care of our responsibilities and coordinating several fire departments from Medina County to aid Cuyahoga County, sending five of our tankers to assist.

The blackout served to illuminate the important role of county government in emergency situations. It also revealed that in many areas of the country, local governments need the help and cooperation of our state and federal counterparts to address infrastructure shortcoming that led to the power failure and the subsequent water, sewer, jail and other problems that surfaced in its wake. The nation's emergency management agency is already in the process of surveying critical facilities, such as water and sewage treatment plants which failed along with the electricity. Undoubtedly, county government will be at the center of working with our political subdivision partners as well as state and federal officials to strengthen and improve our infrastructure in the future.

Blackouts haven't been the only recent challenge in Medina County. Along with our neighbors to the east, we had more rain in July than we needed or wanted. In fact several counties across the state joined us in record breaking rainfall. Several counties, including Medina County were declared disaster areas by President Bush as the result of flooding and wind damage from a tornado in Mahoning and Trumbull counties.

A severe storm hit and right on its heels before we had a chance to recover another storm flooded a major portion of our county. Through this crisis we had a superb display of intergovernmental cooperation. Communities and neighboring counties who were unaffected by the flooding began contacting us and offering assistance if needed. It was local government that led the emergency response for residents, with our EMA quickly responding. A fire station in Medina city became the staging area and coordination point for the many fire departments that came to assist. Several fire departments coordinated their efforts to perform a river rescue during a flash flood period. Emergency sandbagging was implemented in some areas. Water was pumped out of many basements and assistance given to residents in removing debris from basements. Volunteer organizations like the Red Cross had many volunteers who worked tirelessly for hours over the first week and then again the following week after the second storm hit. They provided meals to responders and residents who were flooded, did damage assessment, and sheltered residents that

were unable to stay in their homes.

Cooperation and assistance isn't always local during an emergency or disaster. We have three dams that we had questioned their safety due to possible structural integrity or due to the excessive runoff from the volume of the storm. A call to Columbus brought an engineer from ODNR from the dam safety program within 3 hours. He was able to work with us over the next 2 days to coordinate emergency repairs to one dam and then evaluate and eliminate any additional concerns we had about the other two dams.

I believe that for us to have a successful response and recovery from a disaster it is important for all of us to remember that it really is a "neighbor helping a neighbor". And that neighbor can be local, state or federal.

As I reflect on the recent challenges we've encountered, I can't help but comment on how Commissioners have been forced to deal with an on-going challenge with our budgets. All across Ohio, county commissioners find themselves in the unenviable position of prioritizing resources in a time of shrinking budgets and expanding demand for services. How commissioners approach other county elected officials and work with county agencies in these difficult times can make a big difference. Several county commissioners have hosted budget seminars for all county elected officials and selected department heads in their county. In these seminars, commissioners create a forum to review the budget and appropriation process, examine the county's revenue and expenditures, and then open a discussion about the needs of offices and the outlook for the county budget. Many county commissioners have felt these meetings have really helped county elected officials appreciate the roles and responsibilities of their courthouse counterparts and the daunting task of commissioners who hold the purse strings.

As your President, I have had the privilege of seeing how county commissioners across the state have been at the center of crisis and chaos and managed to shine under the spotlight. Over the past year, we have seen varying degrees of fiscal crisis, unfunded mandates, floods, and other natural disasters. County government has been at the center of it all and we have done well for the citizens of Ohio.