



After the Fact | [Event Rebroadcast: A Tale of Two Floods](#)
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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc: Welcome to “After the Fact,” a podcast from The Pew Charitable Trusts. I’m Dan LeDuc, and over the last couple of episodes we’ve been talking about the challenges of preparing American communities for flooding. Well, now the good people of Texas are contending with the reality of flooding. Hurricane Harvey was called an epic storm, and so is the damage it wrought: inundated homes, washed-away roads, sewers and water systems unusable. Rising waters have been an increasing concern in recent years, and other cities have faced major floods. We can learn from their experiences. Back in May, Pew hosted a discussion between two mayors who have been through storms and high waters. One of them was Joseph Riley, the former mayor of Charleston, SC. He is now a Pew distinguished fellow and a national leader on flood preparedness. He was joined by Jim Brainard, mayor of Carmel, IN, which is not far from Indianapolis in the center of that state, where there can be heavy rains—and lots of water.

Their discussion was moderated by Bloomberg reporter Chris Flavelle, and here he is.

Chris Flavelle: Mr. Mayor and Mr. Mayor, I wonder if we can just start with sort of a definition of terms. People hear climate change, they think all kinds of things. Give me an idea of what climate change means for your communities right now. Is it a threat? Is it a nuisance? Is it weather? Is it existential? How do you see climate change, and how concerned are you about your communities?

Joseph Riley: Well, I think we don't need to get into the debate of different ideas about the cause of climate change. And I think that's just helpful to move that aside. And the fact is that it's changing. The frequency of severe weather events has increased. The sea level is gradually rising. And so whether it's more frequent storm events that Mayor Brainard experienced or we experienced in Charleston, or the increase in the king tides, a few more inches of water change a neighborhood—it's happening.

And so I think we have to embrace the fact that it's happening. And it's so important that cities with their citizens lay out a sound plan of attack. And we must be proactive. And we must be forward-thinking. And we must have a commitment to resilience, because if we don't, then



we're ensuring that our community will be damaged further in the future. And that's not in anyone's best interests. And that's not doing our job.

Chris Flavelle: And then, Mayor Brainard, it's great that you're here, because I think people will sometimes associate climate change with affecting coastal cities the most severely. But perhaps you can give us an idea of why it's not just coastal cities dealing with these kinds of issues.

Jim Brainard: Well, certainly coastal cities are going to be impacted, and probably impacted more dramatically in the beginning of our climate change challenges than inland cities. However, cities across the Midwest and inland from the coast are dealing with more storm events each year and more storm events of greater intensity. I think one year we counted we had 12 100-year rains. One year.

Chris Flavelle: Wow.

Jim Brainard: We are in the part of the country that has tornadoes. In fact, I was thinking, just as I was listening to the introductions, about being in a very similar panel about a year ago with the mayor of Kokomo, IN, who's located about half an hour to the north. And this was an event sponsored by the Hoosier, the nickname for people from Indiana, the Indiana Environmental Council. And we were in a university building in downtown Indianapolis. We broke up about 1 o'clock in the morning and went back to our respective city halls. Within two hours, a third of Kokomo had been destroyed by a tornado. And it was so ironic that we had been in a climate change seminar just a few hours earlier.

Even though my city is urbanized, part of the greater Indianapolis metro area, we're very close to farm communities. As the weather changes, different sorts of pests are impacting how crops are grown. That's of great importance to some of the farmers. It should be important to all of us. We like to eat. We have those issues. We have the issues of our stormwater management system, how much has to be invested in it.

So we're dealing with all these things across the country, simply not on the coastal areas. But we do have tornadoes. We have heavy rain events. We have weather that's changing, and changing very drastically and very quickly.

Chris Flavelle: You're both in red or reddish states. Give us a sense of how your constituents look at this. There's a sense on the coasts that, you know, the further inland you go, or the further you go into Republican territory, the less agreement there is that this is happening. How do your constituents see these threats? And have you found a good way to talk about them that doesn't sort of veer off into debates about ideology or science?



Jim Brainard: Let me start with that. I'm a Republican, even though I have the blue tie on, and Joe's the Democrat and he has the red tie on.

But mayors talk to people on the street. They're out in the community every day. And they have an advantage that people in the state capital and the people in the federal capital don't have in that we have this daily contact with our constituents. And I have yet to meet anyone of any party who, first of all, wants their family to drink dirty water or breathe dirty air. Seems like, as I talk to constituents—many of them solid, strong Republicans, some from the fiscal side, others the social side—I remind them that these for many years were nonpartisan issues.

It was Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican, who set aside most of our national parkland. It was Dwight Eisenhower who set aside the Arctic reserve. It was President Nixon and later Ford, after Nixon resigned, that signed legislation that established the EPA, the Clean Drinking Water Act, the Federal Migratory Bird Act, Endangered Species Act, and so on. It was Reagan that dealt with the ozone hole, the Montreal protocols.

So there's this history. I think back about the Conservation Fund, that 50 years ago was authorized on voice vote—51 years ago now, since we haven't reauthorized it—voice vote in the House and Senate, there was so little controversy about it.

Chris Flavelle: But is there pushback now? Do your constituents say ...

Jim Brainard: No, I don't think so. Sometimes I have to remind people of that. Sometimes you get somebody who wants to talk about the science. And I try not to go there with them if they're coming from that viewpoint. So I go, let's talk about the money we can save. Let's talk about making sure your house or your business isn't flooded, regardless of the reason. But I find most people in my community pay attention to the science.

Chris Flavelle: Right.

Jim Brainard: And I think that most—back to that day-to-day contact we have with our community, I think it's a minority of radio talk show hosts that want to sell ads that have perpetuated this myth—and I consider it a myth—about the science not being real. And very few people in the country really believe that.

Chris Flavelle: And Mayor Riley, your experience.



Joseph Riley: Well, I just don't want to leave this meeting without personally congratulating Senator Warner for his amazing continued public service. He's here today, and a wonderful, great national hero. And just join me in just giving him a round of applause.

[APPLAUSE]

Well, you are, and thank you. And we see it by your being here today.

You know, when I was mayor, I always pictured a couple, a family at home sitting in front of a television at their breakfast room table or dining room or whatever, and just talk to them honestly about what we were working on. And so that, you know, at the local government, you lay out the facts, what the problems are, what you believe the solutions are, and try to do it in a manner that responds to their heartstrings, and explain it respectfully.

And so for our \$280 million or whatever it was invested, we raised property taxes. We raised a stormwater utility fee. We slightly raised business license. And we had a AAA credit rating. We're not—you know, we have a good, well-run fund balance and all that. But if you tell people what something is going to cost and why you need to do it, then they support you.

And you have to do that. I know that, you know, the—and local government's very different, because I mean, you either do it or you don't do it. I mean, police officers cost a certain amount of money, and a 140-foot pipe under the earth at 12-foot diameter costs money, too. So you lay it out and you explain it. And I think running through all of this issue of resiliency—resilience is that the citizens are smart, they're smarter than we are, and they know that you have to make investments. And investments are costly, and it's in their best interest. So you lay it out. And so we—and I think the red and blue is overstated in some ways because you get the national kind of political issues or cultural issues that seem to be somewhat definitive—but citizens want results, and they want their community to be safe. And we have a duty as elected officials, at the local and the national level, to do just that.

Chris Flavelle: We've got, I think, some federal employees in the room. Talk about the split that you see between what local governments can do on their own and what the federal government has to help with. How much assistance did you need as mayor, and do you need now, in terms of federal programs, federal support, federal money to protect your residents?

Joseph Riley: Well, it has to be a partnership. You know, when you see on television that a horrific natural disaster has hit a community, the average citizen, I'd say, well, that's their problem, you know, glad it didn't hit here, you know. No, I mean, they expect the Army Corps of Engineers to be there, or the various national resources. It's part of America. And so I think



it's a partnership. We all have our duties and responsibilities. But the national government—because the national government will respond. You know, there were—and one way is with programs for resilience and mitigation investments.

And the last nine or 10 years, \$277 billion, billion, billion dollars' worth of disaster aid our national government had to spend, because you spend it when someplace gets wiped out. And \$2 billion was invested in mitigation, whereas the studies show that, for every dollar you invest in mitigation, you save \$4. So I think, you know, there is an important opportunity and responsibility at the national level to have programs of mitigation. We're doing—what you saw on the video was mitigation in Charleston. But if we pretend that it's going to be a localized disaster, our citizens are not going to want to do that. So it has to be a partnership.

Chris Flavelle: Mayor Brainard, when we spoke earlier, you made the point I thought was fascinating that you thought the federal government should help cities with flood damage, move people out of flood zones after their homes, if their homes are destroyed, and direct that towards future resilience, as opposed to building back in place. That's a controversial idea. Can you talk about that, and why that's a good idea?

Jim Brainard: I think we have to look at the long term. And I know some instances where homes have been rebuilt two and three times.

Chris Flavelle: Yeah.

Jim Brainard: And—

Chris Flavelle: Or more.

Jim Brainard: Or more. And it just doesn't seem to be a common-sense thing to keep rebuilding in those areas. Let's turn them into nature areas people can enjoy when they're not flooded. But hopefully, folks that live there get out of those areas and don't have to deal with it. I think, back to the question you asked Mayor Riley a minute ago, too, I want to say that it's important, I think, to look back why the federal government got involved helping the states originally.

We went for probably over half our history as a republic, states were on their own, cities were on their own for these things. But we decided that we're a country, we're unified, we need to help those that may get hurt harder than others. That's why we had federal government involvement. For those that weren't hurt, they can help pay for some of the problems in areas that are hurt very badly. And we need that sense of unity to continue.



I heard some rhetoric from the Hill this morning I was reading about, oh, every city and every state can be on their own on some of these things. And I think that's a very dangerous attitude, because when disaster hits, we need everybody else to come in and help that area. Next week, it may be your city. And that's the value of our federal system.

Chris Flavelle: Let's go to federal policy explicitly. Are there things that, from your vantage point, the federal government should do differently, or should do more of, perhaps do less of, to make your jobs easier to protect your cities?

Joseph Riley: Well, I think investing in mitigation, because these are costly things. And I don't know how much money what Jim outlined, because I know in Charleston, it's several million dollars. We have 48 homes in a suburban part of our city that are always flooded and, you know, they need—the land needs to be acquired and turned into some form of recreational or mitigation lake or whatever. And so that's beyond the scope of the city. So I think that the national government investing in those, and I think the—we used the FEMA mitigation bank a couple of times.

This is an interesting one. Well, it didn't flood. But we had an old theater. And we also have—we're in a seismic zone, so we have to retrofit the buildings. And so they had a mitigation probe in the old theater, shore up the foundations. It was beyond our ability to afford. So I think that's a good role for the national government, with some cost-sharing with the local government.

Chris Flavelle: The federal budget proposal came out today. The federal government proposes cutting some of these programs, either reducing or eliminating. And one of the arguments they make is that, if you give cities and states less money to prepare for disasters, they will find a way to find more money on their own. They'll take more responsibility for those rules. Is that a fair theory, do you think?

Jim Brainard: No.

Chris Flavelle: Okay.

[LAUGHTER]

But their point seems sound. If these are important tasks, and cities bear the brunt if they're not performed, cities have the greatest incentive to find that money. But you think they won't.

Jim Brainard: It's back to what I was saying a minute ago, that we have poor cities and wealthy cities, in-between cities. The poorest of our cities need that help. They're not going to find it. Of



course, the wealthy ones will find a way if they have good planning to do it. But again, the advantages of this big country, this federal system that we have, which is in essence a partnership between our states and the national government, needs to help those who are most vulnerable.

Joseph Riley: You know, proposals like that, I mean, the budget that came out today, and at the local level, I mean, I get a lot of good ideas from my citizens that made something I proposed a heck of a lot better. Or maybe the original idea wasn't that great. So I think these are coming out of the chute of the new administration. And I think that, in this instance, that's not a sound argument, because in the final analysis, the citizens are going to expect a national response. And I think to have a cost-sharing form of a mitigation system produces far better results for the nation, as well as for localities.

Chris Flavelle: Let's go long term for a moment, and then I want to open it up to questions. Help us understand, from your point of view, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years down the road, what does a very resilient city look like? What should mayors and other local officials do right now, and federal officials to help them, do to prepare cities both for the threats that we know about, but the ones we don't, as well? How do you change the way you build, the way you protect, the way you encourage land use decisions? What should we be doing right now so that the damage that we know is increasing—we don't know how much—is lessened down the road?

Jim Brainard: One of the things I think is important is city design and planning. And quite honestly, as a country, we've done that very poorly since the end of World War II. We have sprawled out, compared to the development patterns, the grids that we had prior to 1945, when we had less than a quarter of our population with automobiles, to today, when almost everyone outside a few cities along the coast has at least one, if not more, personal cars. We've sprawled out so far that our ability to build infrastructure farther and farther and farther out in a very sprawling development pattern costs so much that we can't do it very well.

We need to be smarter. I'll give you one example. Think about a 40,000-square-foot lot. If we put surface parking on that lot and build a one-story building on 10,000 square feet. The other option is to build a five-story building on the entire 40,000 square feet. So the difference is, say, at \$2 a square foot in property tax, something mayors tend to think about. It's going to be \$20,000 for example A. It's going to be \$400,000, if you do the math, for example B.

And that's just the revenue side. Then you have the cost of the road, \$10 million a mile for a two-lane road, the cost of the sewer pipe, the water pipes, the electric lines, the gas lines, and so on, policing that road, providing fire protection with all this sprawl. Again, 20 times the amount of revenue for the same amount of private sector capital, 20 times the expense at least



from the taxpayers to provide services. Our urbanized areas have sprawled out so far, cities have very little money left for basic infrastructure.

Chris Flavelle: So denser development.

Jim Brainard: Yeah. I was talking in one city in a neighboring state—I won't name them to protect the guilty—but they showed me this new area of town. And there was this old city councilman in the car with us. And he said, I didn't vote for this. And I asked why. And he said, well, it won't make any money. And I said, did you ever work out the numbers? And he said no. So we did, and I used it in my talk the next day. They had developed this new area, and they had about \$6 million in expenses, about a \$3 million infrastructure bond, \$3 million of services with fire and streets, employees, and so on.

And then we looked at the revenue they were getting from this newly developed area. It was half the cost. Three million dollars in revenue, because it was sprawl. Had they taken this and built four- and five-story structures, it would have been revenue positive. But as a result, they were spending all this money they needed to be using, quite honestly, on other things—social programs and so on—and better infrastructure.

Chris Flavelle: And I guess—

Jim Brainard: So if I can just make my point quickly, we need to start with designing our cities in a smarter, more fiscally responsible way so that we have money to do it properly.

Chris Flavelle: And Mayor Riley, the problem in Charleston is not sprawl; it's losing land. How do you cope with the situation where you know you'll lose land over time?

Joseph Riley: Well, I think that, given the acceptance, increasing acceptance, of climate change in all forms, I think that land use planning and community long-range planning has a different lens or filter that you look through now that you didn't 30 years ago. And it's about this issue. Okay, as we look forward, put climate change in front of us. Then infrastructure, make sure that it's built to withstand that. Senator Warner pointed out, he was secretary of the Navy, concerned about Norfolk, but that base is secure, but will people be able to get to and from?

So the infrastructure, nature-based solutions that we—very keen on the riverbanks or watersheds or coastal zones, and using what nature can produce and has produced to mitigate the impacts. And then wise implementation of land use plans, the houses up and all that. So again, when I was first elected a long time ago, it wasn't so much on our radar screen. It is now.



And that's why this effort is so important, because it's not just the billions of dollars that it will save. I'll tell you, you go through a natural disaster, and the heart-wrenching, emotionally destructive heartbreak that happens when someone loses their home or something important in their community is destroyed, and heaven forbid lives are lost, then you want to make sure that you're wisely putting into place policies and procedures and investments and mitigate that. It's very important. I think our country has changed, and this is a top-level responsibility now and in the future.

Chris Flavelle: The sharp edge of that, of course—and then I—please, if you have a question, let me know after this—the sharp edge of that is when entire neighborhoods aren't there anymore, right? I was at a FEMA conference earlier this year, and someone made that point that your strategy, your package of strategies has to include moving people away from the most vulnerable areas.

We discussed this earlier. As a mayor, losing your tax base, it sounds like hell, right? But at some point, you were saying, it's better to have people out of danger than to have a tax base that keeps on flooding. I know from our reporting there are many other mayors either considering that question or actively avoiding considering that question. What is your advice for them? How do you, as a forward-looking mayor, how would you recommend they consider the question of when is it time not to rebuild in a given neighborhood?

Joseph Riley: Well, every neighborhood is different. You know, you have to look at the facts, the statistics, and the reality. And if any reasoned conclusion is that it's no longer sustainable, then you have to sell it, you know? And that's not something you just shoot from the hip about. And you have to take it very seriously. But I think we will see that in some coastal areas. As I mentioned, the 46 homes in a suburban part of Charleston.

And then people are awakening to that, as well. You know, your house gets flooded one time, that's a real pain in the neck. Six times in 15 years, and you just can't take it anymore. So I think that's biting the bullet that I think increasingly will be done.

Dan LeDuc: Mayor Riley just talked about facts, statistics, and reality, and that's what every episode of this podcast is supposed to be about. We also hope it's about humanity—and so we want to take a moment and wish the people of Houston and the surrounding environs our best wishes for a strong recovery. Our thoughts are with you.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."