

## D.C. area's interim emergency plan: Tiny steps 'to nowhere'

By [Robert McCartney](#), Published: October 26

Based on the average of the past 30 winters, the first inch of snow in our region won't fall until Dec. 29. But it's not too early for area leaders to be discussing how we'll fail to cope.

In fact, local officialdom has been busier than usual this year pondering how to avoid the notorious paralysis that afflicts the Washington region during winter storms.

After seven months of study, a regional committee gave initial approval Wednesday to a plan that's supposed to improve area cooperation in emergencies ranging from snowfalls to a terrorist attack.

It's nice that the region is making an effort, but the plan is too small and incremental to cope with the problem. The main innovation is creating an information-sharing office that's going to have a full-time staff of just one or two people this winter.

Montgomery County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville), who chairs the panel that produced the plan, acknowledged that something a bit more robust will ultimately be needed.

"Snow season is coming up, and we want to get something in place. This is an interim approach to get us through the next few months," he said.

So, seven months of work yield an "interim approach."

The whole exercise highlights yet again how the area's fragmented power structure slows or blocks major reforms. Authority and responsibility remain so divided — among states, cities, counties and federal agencies — that nothing big can happen even when everybody recognizes the need.

In this case, a central issue has to do with early release guidelines. How can the region ensure that the federal government and other employers send people home well before a storm hits or after crews have had time to clear the roads?

The opposite happened in the instantly infamous storm of Jan. 26, the event that led the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments to create Andrews's committee.

That afternoon, everybody left the office just as the storm struck. A cascade of bad decisions and lousy communication turned three to five inches of snow into commutes home of eight to 12 hours.

The new plan hopes to avoid that by setting up a Regional Incident Coordination program — the one with the tiny staff. It aims to provide better, faster updates about weather, road and transit conditions so authorities make wiser choices.

Maybe it'll help a little. Still, the proposals leave in place two big obstacles.

First, all the local governments jealously continue to insist on making decisions themselves and on their own timetables.

Second, even if they agree quickly on the best course of action, there's no single person or office responsible for advising the public what it's supposed to do.

“The fundamental way that decisions are made in the region won't change. It's all still done on a voluntary basis by committee,” said David Snyder, a Falls Church City Council member and representative on the council's regular emergency preparedness committee.

Snyder and some other elected officials and business leaders favor a more centralized structure. But the committee concluded that would require time-consuming legal changes — possibly including an act of Congress.

Moreover, there's no appetite in the District, Maryland, Virginia or other jurisdictions to cede any authority. The plan is expected to receive final approval Nov. 9.

“This could go much further, but it goes as far as possible, given the dynamics of the region,” said Jim Dinegar, chief executive of the Greater Washington Board of Trade.

The debate would all be less worrisome if it were just about snowstorms. Instead, inevitably, it's colored as well by concern about terrorism.

D.C. Council member Phil Mendelson (D-At Large), another member of the region's emergency preparedness committee, has been pushing for action on this since the 2001 terrorist attacks. He finds the new plan frustrating.

“This is what's characterized the last 10 years: very hesitant moves towards progress,” Mendelson said. “9/11 was characterized by gridlock, and so was the [August] earthquake and Jan. 26: no clear message what to do, no clear message where to go. It's kind of incremental steps to nowhere.”

If it's fuzzy how the region makes and communicates common decisions about handling snow, that's annoying. If such fuzziness hampers efforts to deal with a radioactive or chemical weapon, that could be tragic.

I discuss local issues at 8:51 a.m. Friday on WAMU (88.5 FM).