A fast track to emergency preparedness

By Phil Andrews, Published in *The Washington Post* online on November 4, 2011

The Washington region must avoid a repeat of the massive gridlock that occurred last Jan. 26 , when a seven-inch snowstorm that began about 3 p.m. resulted in dangerously long commutes — often as long as six to 12 hours — for thousands. The mess had multiple causes: Rain washed away road treatments creating icy conditions, electrical outages took hundreds of traffic signals out of service, regional coordination and communication to the public was lacking, employees were released from work too late and all at once, and too many workers tried to drive home during the storm. The result was gridlocked roads that severely compromised public safety, including stranding many commuters reliant on buses. Metrorail, notably, was unaffected.

Although the region is much better prepared for emergencies now than before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and performed well during Hurricane Irene, January's gridlock must not happen again, because it could cost lives whether the crisis is caused by a storm, earthquake, chemical spill or terrorist attack. The nightmarish Jan. 26 commute made clear how much more needs to be done to protect the region.

As a result, the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments created a committee to look at ways to improve the region's preparation for and response to emergencies. The committee was made up of emergency managers and local officials, as well as representatives of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, state departments of transportation, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, electric utilities, the Greater Washington Board of Trade and the Red Cross.

Last week, the committee voted unanimously to recommend the following comprehensive, readily implementable measures:

● Establish a Regional Incident Coordination (RIC) Program, with highly trained staff, to monitor and catalyze a regional response to any events with a regional impact. RIC staff can distribute critical information to ensure that local officials have a full understanding of the regional situation and can coordinate their decisions. Because the District's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency has agreed to host and staff the program at its emergency operations center, this critical operation could be up and running as soon as next month.

● Work with employers to revise their release policies to ensure that workers leave their jobs in time to get home before the weather gets bad — or stay put until the transportation network has the capacity to handle them. To set the stage, the Office of Personnel Management, whose release policies affect 300,000 federal employees in the region and influence many other employers, is planning a "leave no later than" dismissal option, as well as "remain at the workplace" or "shelter in place" options.

● Help residents make better decisions on their own by providing them with real-time information about traffic conditions and emergency advisories. Fairfax County will soon launch a Virtual Joint Information Center to provide regional information to the public. To lay the groundwork for an emergency, ongoing regional public information campaigns — necessary, given the substantial turnover in the D.C. region — should be conducted on emergency preparedness, on what to do during emergencies and on how to sign up for electronic alerts at www.capitalert.gov.

● Make the Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination Program, which analyzes regional traffic conditions, an around-the-clock operation.

● To help maintain transportation capacity, maximize the use of alternative work schedules and teleworking when snow is forecast. Install backup power of at least eight hours into traffic signals on major roads to prevent gridlock during outages. Speed up the towing of disabled and abandoned vehicles to maintain road capacity and access for emergency vehicles.

● Identify and ensure backup power to all critical facilities, and formalize emergency coordination protocols between local governments and utilities. Test evacuation, communication and coordination plans in regional exercises.

● Appoint an oversight group to monitor progress in implementing these recommendations.

This robust, well-coordinated regional approach can be implemented promptly. The committee doesn't recommend pursuing the creation of a regional emergency authority that would likely take years to implement and would make decisions currently made by elected officials who are accountable to the public.

Improved government preparation, coordination, decision-making and public communication are essential to improve our region's safety during emergencies. It's also crucial that employers consider regional transportation conditions and capacity before releasing employees and that individuals be prepared for emergencies and avoid using roads when capacity is scarce. We need governments, businesses and individuals working together to make our region a safer place.

The writer is a member of the Montgomery County Council (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville). He is chairman of the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments' Incident Management and Response Committee and Emergency Preparedness Council.