

Like a Bolt Out of the Blue

Published on **15 Oct 2012**

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Posted in **Advocacy and policy**



Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker at USGBC's National Leadership Speaker Series

How Local Leaders are Charting the Road to Resilience

A perfect storm...

It's not just a good book title.

We've got a doozy brewing right before our eyes.

We have major, I mean major, infrastructure deficiencies that are only getting worse.

The country's collective [infrastructure GPA is a "D,"](#) according to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). Look, you give me a D on anything and I get the message. Heck, I'm doing everything I can - staying up late, studying all weekend and doing every bit of extra credit I can find.

What's the extra credit that ASCE prescribes for our beleaguered infrastructure? They say we need a near immediate investment of \$2.2 trillion dollars. In other words, the very bones of our economy – our buildings and bridges and roads – are being diagnosed year in and year out with a severe case of worsening osteoporosis.

Then, we also seem to be having year after year of record disasters. In fact, the frequency of natural disasters has been on the rise since 1980. 2011 was the [costliest year on record](#). In 2011, the U.S. had 14 billion-dollar disasters, another record. Just last week, *USA Today* ran a special report highlighting the trend: "[Climate Change Behind Rise in Weather Disasters](#)."

Now put the two together — a weakening infrastructure that makes us more vulnerable *plus* stronger and more frequent disasters. This is a perfect storm that we should be doing something to avoid.

Well, we can all be comforted by the fact that a new [resiliency agenda](#) is being embraced and implemented by local leaders.

As I said at recent our [National Leadership Speaker Series](#) on Oct. 1 at the National Press Club, it's our cities and our counties that are on the frontlines. But they are not awaiting the results of studies, or spending time diagnosing and re-diagnosing the problem. They are taking action.

"And historians will say that the turning point came like a bolt out of the blue," said Mayor George Heartwell of Grand Rapids, one of the event's keynote speakers. "Despair threatened to choke the nation, but a sustainable future...took root and flourished and pulled us back from the brink of disaster.

"And they will say that it began in cities!"

Local leaders, like Mayor Heartwell, are adopting a forward-thinking approach and implementing a no-regrets set of solutions so our communities are ready for disaster and better prepared for changing temperatures, stronger storms, more flooding, and lengthier droughts.

"Each [of our local leaders] is taking on the energy and environmental challenges facing America with passion and ingenuity," said Michael Schmitz,



executive director of ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, which represents more than 500 local governments. “These leaders are not waiting.”

It’s about creating communities built to last. Our local leaders have set us on the road to resilience, putting calcium in the bones of our communities and ultimately making our country stronger and greener for today and tomorrow.

“And it’s ironic that local government...is talking the longer view,” said Vice Mayor Kristin Jacobs of Broward County, Florida, another keynote speaker from the event. But she pointed out, it’s not a journey we can take alone. “We know that we have to work together,” said Jacobs.

Mayor Ralph Becker of Salt Lake City, Utah, the third keynote speaker, detailed various actions his city is taking in areas of water, transportation and buildings. “We’re all on the same kind of path. We’re all looking to what we can do,” said Becker. He also cautioned against letting the seemingly slow incremental effects of climate change lull us into complacency.

All three speakers emphasized that common theme: *Do not delay. There’s a long way to go and a lot more to do.*

“It starts today,” Heartwell said. “It starts now. It starts with us.”

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