

# Recovery in Puerto Rico

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) May 23, 2019



As we have seen so often in recent times, communities must be resilient in the face of a whole range of natural and man-made disasters. Whether it is wildfires in the West, flooding along the Mississippi River and its tributaries in the Midwest, or the towns torn by tornados in the Southeast, regions must consider the next steps as they make their areas once again livable and their economies thriving.

Nowhere in America is the challenge to recover, rebuild and become more sustainable than in Puerto Rico, more than a year and half after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in 2017. (Reminder: Puerto Rico is a part of America,)

I recently had occasion to be in Puerto Rico with the professional organization, Lambda Alpha International (LAI). This land economics society, with members from the fields of architecture, city and regional planning, real estate finance and law, has over 2,000 members in more than two dozen chapters across North America and overseas. The international group holds spring and fall meetings, to conduct its business and to learn about the latest developments in its host city in sessions arranged by the local chapter.

For its Spring 2019 meeting, LAI deliberately selected San Juan as its meeting site, even though there was no local chapter of the organization. The hope was that by meeting in Puerto Rico, the members would be able to see firsthand the state of progress in the recovery and contribute, even if in small measure, some professional advice to the ongoing rebuilding efforts.

An early contingent was on the ground for a day-long charrette focused on an older neighborhood of San Juan. The community of Rio Piedras, once a separate municipality, is home to the main campus of the University of Puerto Rico.

Over the years, Rio Piedras has been experiencing disinvestment and depopulation, conditions made worse by the impacts of the hurricane and the commonwealth's ongoing financial crisis. The planning session, involving participation of our LAI delegation, along with local leaders and community stakeholders, looked at ways to improve the connections between the university and

the surrounding community. A report intended to enhance the quality of life for the community was one deliverable.

### **Best efforts**

The picture that is sometimes painted here on the mainland is that the government of Puerto Rico is in disarray and, at least in the view of some in Washington, can't be trusted to put federal resources to effective use.

The impressions we gained in the course of two days of meetings and tours were that serious people were putting forth their best efforts, not only to bring about recovery but to create a stronger, more resilient island economy. For example, we heard from Omar Marrero, executive director of Puerto Rico's P3 Authority (P3 standing for public-private partnerships). He has a vast portfolio, including responsibility for investments in ports, a convention center and other elements of the island's infrastructure.

Great attention is being given to the reconstruction of Puerto Rico's electrical utility system. In the aftermath of the storm, we in Baltimore had heard of areas of the island being without electrical power for months on end. Now officials are creating a new P3 entity with plans for totally restructuring the electrical grid.

Creation of a series of eight mini-grids that can be interconnected as needed is at the heart of the new system. Efforts also are underway to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels – i.e., coal and oil – that is shipped from the mainland at a high cost, with movement toward greater utilization of wind and solar generated energy.

Not only is Puerto Rico in the process of recovering from loss but it is actively engaged in providing economic development opportunities for the future. A prime example is the master plan that has been created for the redevelopment of a former U. S. Naval Base, Roosevelt Roads, at the east end of the island. This is a 3,400-acre site that has been transferred through the Base Realignment (BRAC) process from the federal government to the commonwealth.

The redevelopment can take advantage of an 11,000-foot runway on an airfield that had been part of the naval base. The mixed-use proposal includes residential and retail components, along with an ambitious new tourist destination, closer to the El Yunque tropical rain forest than the resort areas in the San Juan metro area. The plan even calls for an assisted-living senior community proposed by a Maryland-based developer.

Despite a good deal of negative press coverage of Puerto Rico, many encouraging activities are underway. And, with regard to our professional association, LAI now has a new San Juan chapter with 16 highly qualified members.

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