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## **WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**Testimony of Pamela Gonzales Granger, PE  
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**Before the Committee on Homeland Security**

**Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology**

**United States House of Representatives**

**For the Field hearing entitled "Emergency Preparedness: Examining Federal, State and Local  
Coordination in Coastal Communities."**

**Tuesday, November 28, 2023**

## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman D'Esposito, Ranking Member Carter and other members of the subcommittee. I am Pamela Gonzales Granger, PE, a practicing registered professional civil engineer, owner and principal engineer of McBade Engineers & Consultants, LLC in Youngsville, Louisiana. Currently, I own and manage a woman owned small business civil engineering firm that provides professional civil engineering services to local and state governmental clients for infrastructure projects. I have been providing engineering modeling, planning and design services to governmental clients for over 29 years.

I am honored to testify today before your subcommittee based upon my personal experiences and my firm's experience over the past seven years with implementing disaster recovery and mitigation projects within small local communities in Louisiana as part of the August 2016 Flood known as DR 4277. I have personally led every project that my firm is involved in that is funded by both the Hazard Mitigation Program (HMGP) and HUD which are administered through the State of Louisiana through Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) and the Louisiana Office of Community Development through the Louisiana Watershed Initiative (LWI) Program, respectively as part of the recovery and mitigation efforts of DR 4277. I have firsthand knowledge of the federal, state, and local coordination and implementation of disaster recovery and mitigation projects through the HMGP and LWI funding for the local communities of Youngsville and Church Point, Louisiana.

My testimony today focuses on the needs, benefits, challenges, and areas where we can collectively improve on the coordination and implementation of the HMGP program, disaster recovery and mitigation so that communities can recover, be more resilient and implement projects that result in a reduction of flood levels and flood insurance premiums. My experience is based upon the two recent DR 4277 regional detention pond projects for the City of Youngsville, Louisiana.

## **Needs and Benefits of HMGP and other Federal Programs for Disaster Preparedness, Recovery and Resilience for Small and Local Communities**

The phrase "water doesn't know political boundaries" became very apparent to many small communities throughout Louisiana during the flood of August 2016. Many communities, including the City of Youngsville, recognized that drainage, stormwater management and floodplain management was beyond what a community does just within its own corporate limits. Small communities where drainage is influenced by adjoining communities, communities downstream and coastal tides must work on a regional basis and work with state and federal partners to implement projects that positively impact a region.

Many small communities have limited financial resources as well as staff resources that have the availability and experience to identify and implement projects and activities on a regional level. Most community charters prohibit and/or limit local funding for projects that may be more regional in impacts and location. This is why the need continues for federal and state funding of projects that result in a regional impact on drainage, stormwater, and floodplain management.

Projects like the City of Youngsville's Bailey Grove Regional Detention and Coulee LaSalle Regional Detention are great examples of how the local governments agreed to work together on the selection and implementation of regional projects with the HMGP funding appropriated for the "Acadiana Region". Both projects benefit the City of Youngsville, City of Broussard, Unincorporated Lafayette Parish, Vermilion Parish, Iberia Parish, and St. Martin Parish. None of the entities by themselves would have been able to fund \$10M in regional detention projects. The projects provide for a reduction of four to twelve inches in 100-year Base Flood of the FEMA modeled channels of Coulee LaSalle and Bayou Parc Perdu depending upon where you are located along the channel within each City or Parish. In an area where most homes had on average six inches of water within the homes during the 2016 flood, this is recognized as a significant benefit. In Youngsville alone there was more than an estimated \$29M in flood damage to homes in the areas of these channels.

## **Challenges with Applications, Implementation and Reimbursements**

After disasters like the 2016 flood or hurricanes, small municipal governments face a daunting task of recovery, typically with limited staff resources. Many small communities do not have full engineering departments or grant writers and have limited accounting staff.

### ➤ **The Challenge of the Procurement Policy:**

To apply for federal grant programs such as HMGP or BRIC, most small communities need to hire a consultant due to limited internal resources. Oftentimes, local communities such as Youngsville would prefer to get consultants that are familiar with their infrastructure and their needs to help them with the grant application. Typically, the grant applications require a level of engineering preliminary study and/or modeling to answer the questions and score well on the application for approval. This means the community must fund the grant writer with their own funds to apply. Due to the level of engineering analysis, most engineering firms will need to be funded to pursue grants. If the grant application is approved and funded, the community must follow procurement policy to select a firm. The firm that applied for the funding is typically prohibited from submitting for selection to perform the engineering. While communities understand the need for the “level playing field” for consultants, the current procurement policy adds several months to a project for selection, adds cost for the new consultant to learn about the system and costs to the community to fund the applicant consultant to help the selected consultant with understanding the system. This is counterproductive to recovery in time and cost.

### ➤ **The Challenge of Changing Requirements Once a Project is Started:**

Once the project is selected and moves forward, grantees are given instructions with requirements and schedules along with guidance documents. However, as new disasters occur and new funding for those disasters become available, new procedures, processes and guidance documents are developed with the intention of making it easier for the new applicants. Two examples in our experience were the new algorithms and process for the calculation of the Benefit Cost Analysis or BCA and the Hydrologic and Hydraulic (H&H) Report Requirements. Our project plans, specifications, benefit cost ratio and H&H report were submitted in June 2021, but we received comments a year later referring to a guidance document released after our submittal. The BCA analysis was rejected due to new guidance and tool kit that was not previously provided as a grantee for DR 4277. While we understand and appreciate the importance of the BCA and we acknowledge and agree we want to only spend money on projects that provide a benefit that exceeds the cost, a project that has been started should stay within the guidance provided in the grant agreement as long as the grantee has been making forward progress within the given project time and in constant communication with the state partners. We must strive to work together as to not move the goal post throughout the life of the project.

### ➤ **The Challenge of the Federal Partner Review and Coordination:**

As part of the grantee requirements, a quarterly report must be submitted regarding the progress of the projects. There is no requirement for the state and federal partners to provide quarterly or any regular updates to the grantee regarding the review process during the application, funding, or any submittal review phases. If there is a requirement, we did not receive any regular correspondence on our Youngsville projects.

There are many schedule and time constraints that are placed on the grantee for accountability but there are no schedule or time constraints placed on the state and federal partners to provide anything to the grantee. The grantee’s ability to get their project approved, funded and/or reviewed is directly related to how much you constantly inquire, and the number and titles of the individuals you copy on your inquiries. Our experience on our two Youngsville projects was when you are unable to get answers after several weeks and/or months on an inquiry, we reached out to the staff of our congressman.

During the review process, significant delays occurred with comments submitted from the Federal agency to the state agency then to the grantee. The program would benefit tremendously from a review comment system that was on a portal instead of letters generated then sent to a desk for signature, then emailed to one person then

delays getting emailed to numerous others before being sent to the grantee. Once the grantee received comments, a 30–60-day deadline was typically given to the grantee to respond to comments.

➤ **The Challenge of a Central Portal:**

Access to a central portal that the local, state, and federal partners can all utilize is critical to the success of efficient and succinct project implementation. A central portal should be where all information is stored and where all partners can access the same information and where alerts can be set to notify members of submittal documents. A review comment section where all partners provide comments and responses would make the process more efficient and thorough.

While a portal exists, during our project implementation the portal experienced a lot of technical issues including document reduction and failures to alert when documents are uploaded. Due to the numerous technical issues and the inability for everyone to use it efficiently, links to drop boxes had to be created to submit documents for review.

➤ **The Challenge of Reimbursements**

Most small communities like the City of Youngsville do not have the funds to pay consultants and contractors and then wait to be reimbursed by the State. For the first phase of the projects, which is the data collection, modeling and design phase, the City of Youngsville did pay us as the consultants as we submitted invoices, as they had sufficient cash flow at the time of design. Phase 1 of the two projects combined was less than \$2.2M. However, Phase 2 was almost \$8M for construction, program management, construction management and construction observation services. The construction contracts were for nine months, which resulted in an average of \$1M a month in construction and fees for the project. The City of Youngsville does not have the amount of cash flow to pay invoices then get reimbursed. The City of Youngsville has experienced reimbursements and/or payments taking 90 to 120 days. This means that the contractors and engineers are funding the Phase 2 of the projects by taking out loans to meet cash flow to run their companies and paying interest on that money, yet interest is not paid to contractors and consultants. At that rate of reimbursement, consultants and contractors cannot afford to be involved with multiple disaster recovery or mitigation projects at a time. As a small business owner who is passionate about helping small municipal clients like Youngsville with disaster recovery, mitigation and resilience, the reimbursements are a significant challenge to the sustainability of our company. Our experience in 2023 has forced us to limit the number of clients we can assist with federal funded programs at the same time, despite our success in assisting our clients with navigating the process.

**Summary**

Disaster recovery, mitigation and resiliency grant programs are highly regarded and well-intended. With the science and technology at our disposal it should not take the amount of time it takes to implement projects from inception to completion. The two City of Youngsville projects were 2 of 132 projects that received application approval under the HMGP for DR 4277. As of August 2023, only 3 of the 132 projects were approved for Phase 2 which is construction. The City of Youngsville projects are the only 2 projects that have been constructed in the state under the HMGP for DR 4277, seven years after the disaster.

We must improve these numbers and statistics. Working together we can improve the programs to deliver high quality projects quickly, efficiently and cost effectively. We can improve and/or eliminate every challenge identified.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I offer my assistance to work with and provide ideas to the state and federal partners as well as this subcommittee from my perspective as consultant that not only designs but

works as an extension of staff of a local community when working on projects that are federally funded. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.