

Book Review

NOAH'S TOWN: WHERE ANIMALS REIGN

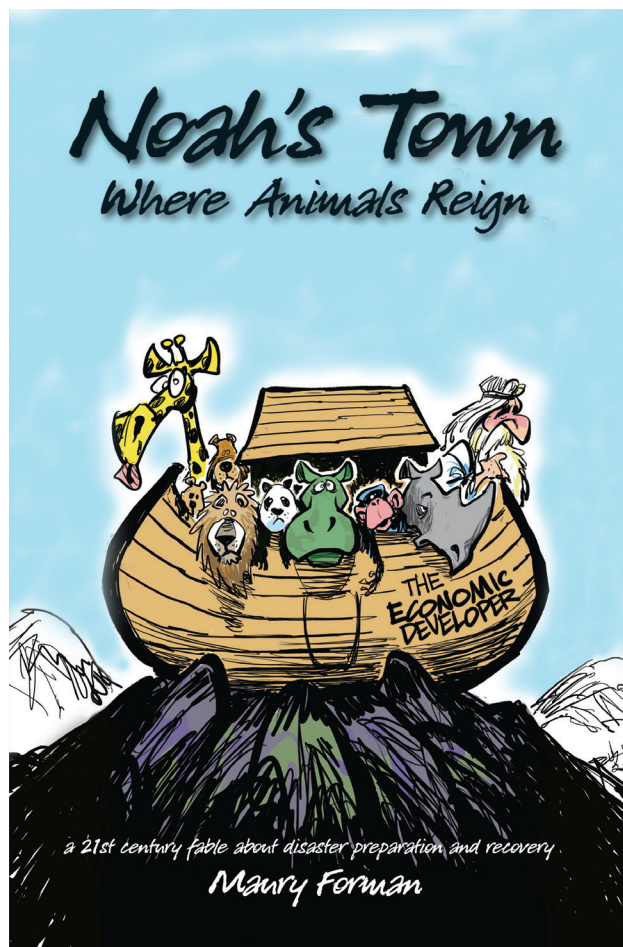
By Robb Zerr, Rural, Small Business & Marketing Services Director,
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Starting a small business requires you to be a bit of a gambler, especially when you're opening a storefront on one of the nation's many main streets. Not only must you face new competition at every turn, but the ever present malls and mega-stores that lure customers away from once crowded downtowns.

Losing customers can be a disaster for any small business where the owner has often sunk his or her life savings into the idea of being their own boss. Indeed, entrepreneurship is one of the hallmarks of our country, building a business from scratch and making it successful.

But the real disaster often goes unseen. While focusing so hard on building a business, we often forget to protect it from the many catastrophes that can shatter our dreams, empty our wallets and empty the vibrant main streets that are the foundation of local economies. When it comes to disaster planning, we often foolishly double down and roll the dice.

A disaster can come in many forms, and planning for this inevitability is one of the most important things any business owner can do. It not only protects your own livelihood and investment, but that of your employees, your suppliers and your neighbors. Maury Forman, an economic development humorist and longtime advocate for Main Street and downtown revitalization as the Senior Manager for the Washington Department of Commerce for almost 30 years, has written a clever, witty fable that serves as a warning for communities, and downtowns in particular, to prepare for the inevitable. Disasters are not a matter of if, but when, and Maury's simple tale about Noah's Town is both entertaining and instructive.



Cover of *Noah's Town: Where Animals Reign*, by Maury Forman.

On the one hand, *Noah's Town: Where Animals Reign* is a fable that tells the story of how the descendants of Noah's Ark integrated themselves into society and formed a sustainable and growing tourism economy in their downtown area. That is until the never expected, once-in-a-lifetime storm causes havoc among residents and tourists. It's a cross between the biblical story of Noah and the folktale of Chicken Little. On the other hand, it is a tutorial on how to identify crises and prepare for them, either by reducing their impact or reducing the likelihood of them occurring. Look just beyond the fable and you have a workbook for your own business or community.

Downtown small businesses provide the oxygen that often keeps an entire community healthy. They are a major stimulator for economic growth and a key revenue generator for local government. They also represent the image and character of a city. Downtowns are unique in that they are typically the only neighborhood that belongs to and is shared by everyone in the region.

Studies have shown that after a major disaster hits a downtown, one in four businesses never reopen again. In rural communities the percentage of businesses that don't recover is as high as 60%. The International Downtown Association reports that downtowns average just three percent of citywide land, but can account for 31% of citywide tax revenue. This means for every one percent of citywide land, downtowns provide approximately 10% of the tax revenue in the form of contributions to the city's assessment base and generating property tax revenues.

Forman recognizes that these disasters are inevitable but that does not mean that investing in disaster preparation and a well-promoted plan can't reduce the financial and personal damage to families and businesses. The United States spends far more on helping people rebuild after disasters than on prevention. Only 40¢ of every \$100 is spent on disaster risk reduction and only 20% of the money that the Federal Emergency Management Agency distributes in disaster grants is earmarked for pre-disaster work.

There is a saying in the disaster relief community that \$1 of disaster prevention saves about \$6 on cleanup and recovery. Unfortunately, many communities are betting that disasters will not occur in their downtowns. To Forman, preparedness is a moral investment.

Noah's Town is not a preachy tome on crisis planning. On the contrary, there is plenty of humor—from groan-out-loud puns to hilarious plays on words—complete with some not-so-subtle coffee cup wisdom. In the epilogue, Forman draws upon a task force report, *Resilient Washington State: A framework for Minimizing Loss and Improving Statewide Recovery after an Earthquake*, for recommendations that every community should consider and implement. Disasters are inevitable, from the slightly disruptive to the life changing, and *Noah's Town* will help you conquer your fears of impending doom in a memorable, charming way.



A graphic from *Noah's Town*.