

Pre-Negotiated Contracts: A Critical Solution for Florida's Debris Removal Challenges

As the former FEMA Administrator and now Chairman of the Disaster Recovery Coalition of America (www.thedrca.org), our members are the contractors who help "put America back together again" by clearing the debris left behind by hurricanes and other natural disasters. In the wake of Hurricanes Helene and Milton, Florida faces the enormous task of removing millions of cubic yards of debris. This isn't just about cleaning up neighborhoods—it's about jump-starting the entire recovery process.

After a major storm, four key elements are critical to a community's recovery: restoring power, clearing debris, reopening schools, and reviving small businesses. Without swift debris removal, none of the other steps can happen efficiently. Roads must be cleared for utility workers, and schools and businesses cannot operate amid storm wreckage.

Florida has a long-standing network of experienced debris removal contractors who have consistently ensured that storm debris is picked up and disposed of properly. But to enhance this process further, Florida needs to embrace a proactive approach by pre-negotiating debris removal contracts before disaster strikes.

In too many cases, contracts are finalized only after a storm hits, leading to artificially inflated prices due to the high demand for contractors. Local governments, desperate to clear the debris, often find themselves bidding against one another, driving up costs. Pre-negotiated contracts eliminate this problem by locking in fair and predictable pricing, helping governments manage their budgets more effectively during the chaotic post-storm period.

Sound public policy should prioritize efficiency and cost-effectiveness in disaster recovery. Pre-negotiated contracts allow local governments to avoid the price gouging that can occur after storms and ensure that contractors are ready to mobilize immediately, shortening the recovery timeline.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Mandate Pre-Negotiated Debris Removal Contracts:** Florida should adopt a policy requiring local governments to establish debris removal contracts before disaster strikes. These contracts can include adjustable pricing tied to storm severity but would avoid the inflated prices driven by immediate post-storm demand.
2. **Promote Regional Contract Coordination:** By coordinating debris removal contracts on a regional level, communities can avoid competing for contractors, securing more competitive pricing and ensuring faster, more efficient debris removal across multiple jurisdictions.

Pre-negotiated contracts are a practical, proven solution that will help Florida recover faster and more responsibly. Let's ensure our state's recovery efforts are as resilient and cost-effective as possible.

About the author: Pete Gaynor is the former FEMA Administrator and Chairman of the Disaster Recovery Coalition of America (www.thedrca.org). He has overseen disaster recovery efforts across the country after some of America's largest weather disasters. He is an expert and a leader in ensuring communities are prepared for and recover swiftly from catastrophic events.

