April 20, 2026

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
U.S. House Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
U.S. House Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Graves and Ranking Member Larsen:

Architects and their communities are directly affected by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) performance and structure. At its best, FEMA delivers critical recovery, risk reduction, and mitigation support in collaboration with all levels of government, nonprofits, and private sector. AIA thanks you for your efforts to address FEMA reform through H.R. 4669.

America benefits from a robust FEMA, especially as disasters grow in scope. Between 2011 and 2024, 99.5% of congressional districts experienced at least one federally declared major disaster. From 1980 through 2025, weather and climate disasters cost the U.S. $426 billion annually, with cumulative costs exceeding $3.1 trillion, according to NOAA and other research organizations. Fueled by extreme weather and expanding infrastructure in high-risk zones, annual property damage averaged $149 billion from 2020 to 2024. Extreme weather events are no longer confined to traditional areas. Hurricanes now hit New York, and Tornado Alley has expanded into a "Tornado Highway" from the Great Plains to the Southeast.

Despite the growing intensity of disasters, the current Administration has cut FEMA's budget, politicized disaster declarations, and reduced staff by over 10 percent. These cuts have weakened FEMA's workforce and hindered the nation's ability to respond and recover. Delays in disaster declarations and appeals leave families and communities without timely support, slowing recovery.

A bipartisan consensus has emerged to reform disaster management. As The American Institute of Architects, we stand with communities and as willing partners in Congress to reform FEMA. Architects are committed to protecting public health, safety, and welfare, but we need tools to support pre-disaster risk reduction, response and recovery. A renewed FEMA, backed by federal support and smart policy, will enable communities to scan and predict future extreme weather events, enhancing preparation, coordination and recovery. Together with resilient design, communities will be able to withstand future extreme weather events, mitigating economic damage and business interruption.

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, every dollar invested in preparedness saves communities $13 in economic impact, damages, and cleanup costs, so smart disaster policy

The American Institute of Architects

1735 New York Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20006

T (800) 242 3837
F (202) 626 7547

aia.org

results in smart fiscal policy. With architects' expertise and thought leadership, a reimagined FEMA can save more lives and drive economic recovery through smart design and post-disaster reconstruction policies.

AIA PRIORITIES

1. Fully Staff and Confirm Qualified FEMA Leadership

   FEMA's reduced staffing and limited capacity are constraining disaster response. A fully staffed agency—with a Senate-confirmed Administrator and strong, experienced leadership across headquarters and regional offices—is essential to year-round risk reduction, response, and recovery.

2. Embed Support of Strong Codes and Standards Across All FEMA Programs

   FEMA programs should consistently prioritize and incentivize stronger, forward-looking building codes and standards to reduce future risks. Building codes are minimum safety standards designed to protect life, not to prevent damage or ensure long-term performance. Federal investments should encourage going above code to meet the severity of disruptions wherever possible. By doing so, taxpayer dollars would be treated as valuable long-term investments in the safety and stability of communities.

3. Strengthen Risk Data, Mapping, and Decision Tools

   Clear, reliable risk data—flood, wildfire, extreme heat, storms, and more—is essential for informed design and construction decisions. Federal investments must improve data accuracy and accessibility to support vulnerability assessments and resilience planning. Empowering communities with accurate, actionable risk data will reduce risks and prioritize investments in resilience.

   Advances in digital twin technology, satellite data, and artificial intelligence now allow us to build better models that reflect current and future risk—ensuring investments and infrastructure decisions are based on the best available hazard science. Federal risk data underpins many private-sector tools in use today. As a core public good, it must be kept accurate, current, and accessible to all communities.

4. Modernize Disaster Declarations for Consistency and Accountability

   There is no such thing as a red or blue disaster—only a red, white and blue recovery. Response and recovery responsibilities must be shared. Federal disaster assistance must be impartial, timely, and based on clear, consistently applied criteria. Major

disasters often exceed the capacity of any one community or state to manage alone, making a strong and reliable federal role essential.

However, the current disaster declaration process is hindered by outdated, inconsistently applied thresholds, broad discretion, delays, and complex administrative requirements. These issues create uncertainty for communities and slow response and recovery. These inefficiencies disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, leaving them without the timely support needed to rebuild and recover.

A more predictable, transparent, and modernized approach is needed to strengthen trust, improve outcomes, and ensure federal support complements—rather than replaces—state and local efforts. This approach must also reinforce incentives for adaptation, mitigation, and long-term risk reduction.

5. Protecting Communities with Resilient Infrastructure

Investments in infrastructure should reduce risk over time—not lock in future losses. FEMA's mitigation programs (BRIC, HMGP, and Public Assistance mitigation) must be strengthened and expanded alongside preparedness, training, planning, and data systems to support risk reduction, faster recovery, and stronger long-term outcomes.

6. Expand Incentives and Financing Tools for Resilient Construction

Communities need simpler, more flexible ways to invest in resilience, especially for smaller, property-level projects. Expanding grants, loans, and insurance programs for adaptation, preparation and planning will reduce risk before disasters occur.

7. Strengthen Federal Leadership for Integrated Disaster Risk Management and Resilient Recovery

To effectively respond to disaster risk and rebuild areas affected by extreme weather events, the U.S. Government needs a bold, comprehensive approach—a new FEMA. A reimagined independent, cabinet-level agency, reporting directly to the president would provide the leadership and coordination necessary to address the growing challenges of disaster response and climate adaptation. While interagency coordination structures exist, they are not sufficiently resourced or empowered to deliver the level of integration, speed, and support that states and communities need.

Integrating FEMA, NOAA, and other select disaster response and environmental policy teams under one agency will streamline federal efforts, reduce inefficiencies, and enhance preparedness.

This agency could expedite funding to distressed areas, lessen risk and impacts, coordinate research, and protect Americans through free and independent weather and climate data.

Architects bring a unique and essential perspective to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Guided by our ethical commitment to protect health, safety, and welfare of the public, we are already responding in critical ways—from designing resilient cities and conducting site risk assessments to post-disaster building safety evaluations, permitting assistance, transitional housing design, and advancing hazard-resistant building codes and zoning requirements.

We must do better.

As disasters grow in frequency and complexity, architects stand ready to help shape FEMA reform. We are committed to working with Congress to design renewed federal programs that deliver the level of assistance our communities deserve.

Sincerely,

Illya Azaroff, FAIA
2026 National President
The American Institute of Architects