

It's a (Planned) Disaster: Lamorinda Communities Test Emergency Response

By Cathy Dausman



Police Chief Bob Priebe, Operations Section Chief, confers with Jay Ingram, Logistics. Photos Cathy Dausman



St. Mary's College Police Chief Adan Tejada, left, confers with MOFD Division Chief Stephen Healy

By the time Californians were practicing their “drop, cover and hold on” skills during the Great California Shakeout, Lamorinda first responders, civic leaders, public servants and volunteers had gathered to assess their community’s needs and reach out to neighboring areas.

On October 18, Moraga and Orinda staged a mock activation of their Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs), under the guidance of Lamorinda Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein. Lafayette did not staff an actual meeting site, but dealt with specific scenarios such as the gymnasium collapse and fire at Acalanes High School and a gas main break at the Olympic Oaks Subdivision, and encouraged residents to participate via e-mail, sending in “faux reports” of damage and injuries to staff and emergency responders, according to Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk in a Friday Summary. “Members of the public were also asked to render aid to their neighbors,” said Falk, “something that we will certainly need to do in a large-scale disaster.”

The police department used its Nixle system and the internal systems that it has for notifying the public, said Police Chief Eric Christensen. “We also used contacts with the schools, the fire department, the county EOC, and the Lafayette business community.”

“The exercise was productive – not only for sharpening staff’s skills but – because it helped us identify some shortfalls in the City’s Emergency Operations Plan,” said Falk.

Rein called the Moraga and Orinda activations “discussion-based exercises, including equipment testing.” The half-day drill literally closed all non-essential services at Moraga Town Hall, as nearly 20 staff members reported to their EOC at

Moraga Orinda Fire District Station 42. Orinda staffers assembled in the Sarge Littlehale Community Room, which became Orinda’s EOC. EOC participants included representatives from local police and fire departments, public works, the American Red Cross, Orinda Union School District, Moraga School District, and members of K6ORI amateur radio group. MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley oversaw the Lamorinda exercise, acting as Agency Representative. Bradley shuttled between EOC sites at Moraga and Orinda, consulting with his counterparts in each location.

Orinda Police Chief Jeffrey Jennings said the October 18 Shakeout activation was an ideal time for the city staff to re-familiarize themselves with and get comfortable with emergency plans. Jennings recently converted the city’s “comprehensive but non-functional” Emergency Operations Plan to a more user-friendly “plug and play” format.

Moraga Police Chief Bob Priebe saw the EOC activation as a chance for town staff to gain exposure through incident training. He noted just how many good ideas come “when everyone is gathered together in the same room.”

Watching events unfold at the Moraga EOC was like watching a live drama.

The scenario was a 7.7 Bay Area earthquake, with accompanying loss of life, poor phone communications, collapsed buildings, impassable roads, gas and electric outages, food and water shortages, an area wildfire, evacuations and crowd control issues. To add to the excitement, participants learned a landslide had all but blocked access to the Caldecott Tunnel.

EOC players included Town Manager Jill Keimach as Incident Commander; Public Works Superin-

tendent Dan Bernie as Safety Officer; Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram, Logistics; Town Clerk Marty McInturf as Public Information Officer, and Chief Priebe as Operations Section Chief. Also on hand were Ken Tom, representing American Red Cross, and a member of K6ORI.

Event facilitators included MOFD’s Division Chief Stephen Healy and Battalion Chief Darrell Lee. Three observers from Saint Mary’s College – Police Chief Adan Tejada, Director of Media Relations Michael McAlpin, and Associate Director of Facilities Michael Viola – stayed through the entire exercise.

Maps, charts and lists soon covered the walls. For the next two hours, participants worked through their problems: what roads were open or closed; where was police help most needed; who had food and water; when was the next work crew coming in.

In the end, everyone had their say, vowing to make “next time” even more efficient.

“This is more than a drill; it happens on a daily basis,” said Keimach. Lee noted the initial “mass confusion”

was intended as a teachable moment.

Healy had high praise for the group. “I’m very impressed,” he said, adding that because of the ongoing danger of wildfire and earthquakes in California, the state is ahead of the curve in disaster preparedness. Tejada couldn’t believe the EOC setup was a

first, and vowed to develop more training for the Saint Mary’s College community.

No matter the outcome, Rein said, “there are 40 more [Lamorindans trained] than in the past.” Priebe agreed, saying in Moraga, “we’ll be okay.”

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Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team also conducted an earthquake drill October 20 at Donald Rheim Elementary School. Participants worked with American Red Cross, Salvation Army, local first responders and public officials as they rescued and transported injured “victims,” established emergency shelter, and provided care.