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Public Forum

Emergency UnPreparedness in Lamorinda?

Here's a query for the new year. Given that our area is due for tectonic cataclysm such as we've seen recently in Haiti, New Zealand, Chile, China, Indonesia, Guatemala, Mexico, etc., should we expect local policy makers to be thinking ahead and taking measures that will ease our region's eventual suffering and loss of life? Alternatively, should we accept that their plates are quite full already with matters of more immediate concern and not ask them to make clear policy for emergency preparedness?

As everyone knows, in 1906 the Bay Area endured a huge temblor which caused a fair bit of damage, but that amount of destruction was dwarfed by what resulted from the sad fact that San Francisco policy makers had not theretofore seriously considered the consequences of fighting a post-earthquake fire after the city's water system had been shattered and quickly drained.

Likewise, it's commonly known that that the damage from the 1991 Oakland Firestorm expanded dramatically because local policy makers had not rationally considered the consequences of their hydrant fittings being different from those of most other agencies, nor the fact that when power lines went down there would be no backup power to pump water up to the reservoirs in the hills.

It's not possible to know exactly what the circumstances will be when the Hayward and/or Rodgers Creek faults slip next time. Will the Delta levees collapse causing a massive influx of brackish fluids into the water supply for much of Southern and Northern California? Will the aqueducts from the Sierras be ruptured? In other words, will there develop a state-wide water crisis and a possible months long interruption of water delivery in parts or all of Lamorinda?

On a local level, do local fire agencies train for such circumstances? Do they co-ordinate with EBMUD to hold water in area tanks and reservoirs for fire suppression purposes? If so, would the water in the tanks actually be available, or would earthquake safety valves prevent the filling of fire engines at the associated hydrants? Are local policy makers (Town/City Council members) paying any attention to these things?

Beyond water supply issues, do the local governments have relationships with local ranchers such that they would provide assistance in widespread public works emergencies such as when major roadways are blocked by landslides, downed trees and so forth? Are there inter-agency plans to quickly re-open roads for EMS traffic following a severe earthquake or prolonged torrential rains? Should area residents care if these and other such relationships with workers and suppliers do or do not exist?

Are policy makers considering other important matters such as working with Meals on Wheels to ensure that the many elderly and frail local residents who cannot easily fend for themselves are accounted for and assisted with food and other support services? What plans are there to help other vulnerable populations recover from a major event? Maybe some residents are wondering what lessons can be learned by Lamorinda from the many disasters that have struck around the world in recent years? How can this information be gathered and assessed? How can we change the structure of the information from being overwhelming and poorly understood by local policy makers into an encapsulated assessment of the challenges Lamorinda will face along with a package of well reasoned suggestions? Prior to offering an answer to that question, I should note that MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley has created a position of Emergency Preparedness Coordinator and the man hired to fill the slot has done a fine job of helping the Lamorinda city & town governments get some sense of how to get up and running in an emergency response format. However, when it comes to ways that citizens collaborate with local governments and other matters of policy, there is an overarching trend to simply use the bits and pieces of what already exists regardless of its potential efficacy. This is to say, there has been no overall assessment of the area's projected needs and, hence, there are only dribs and drabs of justification and understanding for existing policies. Put yet another way, this stuff has not yet been thought through clearly and everyone reading this text will eventually become a beneficiary of this neglect.

In order to develop a long term, encompassing response to the threat of tectonic calamity which Lamorinda is heir to, I would propose that the Town/City Councils direct their Town/City managers to follow a grand jury model and impanel a group of citizen volunteers (including a lawyer, an accountant, researchers, analysts, etc.) along with fire & police representatives to review not just predictions for post-earthquake Bay Area conditions and world-wide after action reports which deal with operational challenges, but also documents which discuss the challenges of the recovery process. After such reading--and deposing various state, ABAG (Association of Bay Area Counties), and county professionals in the disaster industry along with reps. from EBMUD, PG&E, Central San., etc.--they should be directed to submit a report which encapsulates the expected challenges and categorizes potential solutions.

Following the submission of the report, that group should be dissolved and a second group formed to review the various options and make specific recommendations to the Town/City Managers and Councils.

This process would put local policy makers leaps and bounds ahead of their fellows in prior years and, indeed, of many or most of their contemporaries in other localities. Personally, I don't see why the three Councils shouldn't put their resources together to take on such a project. Whereas several years ago they jointly put up over \$30,000 for a report and Emergency Operations Plan which turned out to be wholly worthless, what's proposed here, if clearly and properly defined at the outset, could be done well and for negligible cost.

Again I ask you, should we expect from local policy makers study such as this which would conduce to well informed decision making, or should we just ignore the whole thing? If you agree with the sense of this proposal, please cut this letter out and send it to your incoming mayor along with your own comments. Let your local representatives know that you expect them do good work in this area on your behalf. Living in on the fringe of Lamorinda, I can view the overall picture. I just hope that I'm not the only one.

Respectfully,
Jonathan Goodwin
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(Jonathan Goodwin is an advocate for emergency preparedness and a member of CERT and the Canyon Fire Council)

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