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Information Age Emergency Monitoring

By Cathy Dausman

Orinda and Lafayette police blotters continue to be unavailable while the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department re-structures its distribution. But that doesn't mean Lamorindans need to go without hearing about the latest emergency responses. In fact, the public can access real-time events through a variety of websites and apps, including Nixle, Pulse Point and a county-wide Community Warning System.

Moraga and Lafayette currently use Nixle (www.nixle.com) to communicate with the public. Founded in 2007, the Nixle website says its company offers "both free and paid notification services for local police departments, county emergency management offices, municipal governments and their agencies." Child abductions, a BART station fire, gas and water main leaks, weather warnings and event notifications which may affect traffic patterns all go out over Nixle. Subscribers learned about Lafayette's recent downed power lines; they also were notified about Lafayette school lockdowns immediately following a local bank robbery in real time. Moraga posted Nixle warnings after a stolen car and subsequent hit and run investigation became an area wide manhunt. Nixle also broadcasts Amber Alerts. Users can even assist the agencies involved by responding with "reply to" on the site.

Pulse Point (pulsepoint.org) is a smartphone app designed by a San Ramon Valley fire fighter, said Dennis Rein, Lamorinda's emergency preparedness coordinator. The program was originally developed to enlist help from those with CPR training in nearby medical emergencies. When such an emergency shows on the Pulse Point screen, it pinpoints the user location, the location of the medical emergency and where the nearest life-saving automated external defibrillator can be found. Traffic collisions, medical emergencies, fire alarms, technical rescues and other emergency response events are detailed, right down to the emergency engines responding. There is also an option to monitor dispatch communications as they are made on your smart phone - making the app a modern day police scanner. A variety of agencies subscribe to Pulse Point nationwide. Local agencies making use of the Pulse Point technology include Moraga-Orinda Fire District, Alameda, Contra Costa, and San Ramon Fire departments.

According to its website, the Community Warning System (www.cococws.us/getCurrentAlerts.action) "alerts people in Contra Costa County to imminent threats to their life and safety." Depending on the emergency and affected area, notification may be sent via sirens, phone alerts, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration alerts or Emergency Alert System notifications broadcast over commercial radio stations. CWS also employs a variety of social media platforms, including text and email alerts, Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Nixle, Pulse Point and Community Warning System are quick and easy opt-in subscriptions. Instant gratification for those of us living in the Information Age.

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