

Published June 12th, 2019

The story behind the emergency preparedness and evacuation guide

By Nick Marnell



The idea to publish the Lamorinda Guide to Wildfire Preparedness and Evacuation, delivered to residents' homes in late May, arose from a trip to Napa after the 2017 firestorm that burned 245,000 acres and destroyed more than 8,000 structures in Northern California.

As Duncan Seibert, program manager of the Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team and chair of the Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission, worked shelters in and around the North Bay city, he saw that fire victims came to the shelters with nothing. "When the fire approached their back door, people had 15 seconds to get away," Seibert said. They arrived with no identification, no credit cards, no possessions whatsoever. The horrifying situations that Seibert saw at the shelters moved him to do something to help people better prepare for an emergency.

Thus arose the concept for the Wildfire Preparedness and Evacuation guide, published by the Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission. The booklet cost \$10,000 to produce and was mailed to 27,500 Lamorinda addresses, with 7,500 copies distributed to public safety agencies.

The booklet not only covers emergency preparation but also provides evacuation information, highlighting one of the most elegant public warning systems in the United

States.

Roughly speaking, fire agencies have the knowledge to handle emergencies but have no authority to evacuate. Police departments have the authority to evacuate but have no means to communicate to the public. The ability to communicate emergency evacuation information to the public lies with the Contra Costa County Community Warning System, which alerts residents and businesses that may be impacted by an emergency.

In 2016, the Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission established 18 evacuation zones in the city and posted the evacuation zones into the CWS computer. Lamorinda Community Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein mapped out the evacuation zones for Moraga (23) and Orinda (24) shortly afterward and delivered the data to the warning system. "What could take 15 minutes in the field now happens very quickly," Rein said.

For example, during a fire emergency that hits locations within Orinda Zones 4 and 5, the incident commander calls the police chief not with a request to evacuate a long list of street addresses comprising the affected area but with a request to simply evacuate Orinda Zones 4 and 5. The police chief calls CWS and tells the agency to issue the evacuation order for those two zones only.

The booklet contains pages of evacuation information, including explanations of red-flag warnings, mandatory orders and what to do if trapped. But the most important thing that Lamorinda residents can do, according to Seibert, is to sign up with the county warning system. "Less than 25 percent of people in Lamorinda are registered with CWS," Seibert said. Registration at the CWS website should take no more than five minutes, and the booklet provides all the necessary information.

"The booklet we just put out is another piece of the preparedness puzzle. If people heed all of the information in the booklet, the whole community will be safer," Rein added.

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