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Upgraded zone evacuation system installed after virtual drill

By Vera Kochan

Moraga Police Chief Jon King on Sept. 23 gave the town council an update regarding results from the Aug. 1 Virtual Evacuation Drill, and discussed an upgrade to the previous zone evacuation system made in conjunction with the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and using the talents of Zonehaven, which provides a data-driven interface to create broad situational awareness to empower government agencies and community members with emergency planning and live evacuations.

The new system notes the critical evacuation area; how many structures are located within the area; the population of the area; and the number of acres contained within the zone. There is also information available to discern what traffic positions need staffing and the resources needed to man those locations. King stated that all of this additional data is currently being fine-tuned and will become available to MPD and MOFD within a few short weeks.

Additionally, MOFD has installed a fire modeling program which gives pertinent data such as humidity, wind, temperature and basic weather conditions along with an estimate of the fuel load, which can show where a fire is going to start. It can disclose what a fire is going to do at a one-hour point, three-hour point and a five-hour point.

The fire modeling program can also recommend zones for evacuation. This will allow MOFD to use the program in real-time to make projections on a fire's route of destruction and in turn give MPD a head start for timed evacuation calls in order to stagger departures from town rather than take a chaotic mass evacuation approach.

"This is an incredible tool that we have and we're going to continue to use, but one of the things it shows us is we do have time to make evacuation calls," said King. "I know there's a lot of people out there that are concerned that we can't evacuate the entire town at once, and they're absolutely correct - we can't. Nor would we. Only in a very extreme situation do we think we would need to. I don't know of any city that could evacuate its entire population at once."

King added, "What this does is it tells us when we need to evacuate people, and we can evacuate the city by zone and get people out ideally in an orderly fashion." The new program will also identify temporary refuge areas where people can go to be safe and surrounded by fire trucks if not everyone could get out.

Vice Mayor Mike McCluer expressed concern regarding all of the recent roadwork being done by utility companies along Moraga's main arteries, in many instances closing down one lane of road to vehicles and causing traffic backups.

King assured McCluer that utility companies working along escape routes are prepared to open up the roads within 15 minutes in the event of an evacuation.

During the public comment portion of the presentation, King was asked if there was coordination between MPD, Orinda and Lafayette Police Departments in the event of an evacuation since the routes would progress through those two jurisdictions.

King explained that the three departments constantly work together, are on the same radio wave length and are there to assist each other. By the same token, the reach of mutual cooperation between agencies goes beyond the Lamorinda area.

Last month's Virtual Evacuation Drill was not a one-time lesson. King assured residents that MPD and MOFD are constantly working to train and make improvements now and in the future.

King reminded everyone to register with the Community Warning System (www.cwsalerts.com). He estimated that 80% of Moraga households are already registered, which is the highest percentage in Contra Costa County and quite possibly the highest within the state of California.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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