

Published March 23rd, 2016

## Life, Interrupted for Moraga First Responders at Gas Leak

By Cathy Dausman



Photo Cathy Dausman

March 13 was just another rainy Sunday in Moraga, until it wasn't.

Water had eroded an underground portion of the corner of Rheem Boulevard and Center Street near Moraga Road. That afternoon the pavement collapsed, forming a sinkhole. The sinkhole grew, swallowing a signal light; the falling light post and concrete punctured a four inch natural gas pipeline.

Police evacuated Rheem Valley Shopping Center, including those watching a new Disney animated release at the theater. Shortly before 5:30 p.m. Sunday the call went out to police, fire, town staff and local volunteer emergency responders. "This is Dennis [Rein, Lamorinda's Emergency Preparedness Coordinator]. We are activating an Emergency Operations Center [to manage the sinkhole issues] at the Town Council Chambers."

Rein had been working from home filing paperwork on another local storm related incident - a hillside slide affecting Moraga's Augusta Drive (see related story, page A4). Moraga interim Town Manager Robert Priebe was celebrating a family friend's birthday when he got called in at 2 p.m. Sunday.

"We'd been there about 10 minutes," Priebe said, adding "they were just putting out hors d'oeuvres." It was to be his second Moraga trip; Priebe had already conferred with East Bay Municipal Utility District officials "at the (Augusta Drive) landslide site." He was just bringing portable radios down from the administrative offices when he heard a police officer screaming on his radio about the gas leak. Priebe said the noise sounded "like a jet engine."

"There are things in your life that you'll never forget," he said. He ran outside, relieved to see no flames. Still Priebe feared the gas might ignite. "Everybody saw visuals of San Bruno," he said, referring to that city's pipeline explosion. Priebe worked overnight, only slipping away to nap for an hour about 11 a.m. Monday. "I didn't see my wife again until Monday evening at 7:30 p.m.," he said.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy was dealing with his own flooding in his yard. He had conferred earlier with Rein about the Augusta Drive slide. That afternoon Rein notified Healy that a sinkhole had formed. Rein called again at 5:30 p.m. to tell Healy the sinkhole now involved a ruptured gas line.

Healy put the yardwork on hold. "I reported to Jerry's truck (Battalion Chief Jerry Lee) then went inside (the Town Council Chamber) where fire and law enforcement had set up a unified command," Healy said. They did a hazard assessment and wrote four incident objectives: continue and reinforce perimeter control ("a big challenge"), account for the location and assignment of all fire and law personnel, support PG&E operations and notify the public of building and street closures.

Battalion Chief Felipe Barreto relieved Healy at 11:30 p.m. Healy said using the Town Council

Chambers as the EOC "was a huge success," and that "Jill (former Town Manager Jill Keimach), Bob (Priebe) and the Town Council deserve credit" for developing the site.

Acting police chief Jon King and his wife were enjoying fine food and views of San Francisco from their Cavallo Point Lodge event in Sausalito when he was called. "I rushed home on (highway) 580, dropped off my wife, changed clothes in 90 seconds, took my work car and came in." King tried to convince Priebe to get some rest, but could not. Finally King left at 4 a.m.; he returned two hours later.

Town Clerk Marty McInturf nearly had Sunday dinner on the table when she was called. Her early St. Patrick's Day meal was "90 per cent done," she said. She was just waiting for her husband to walk in the door after work. When he arrived, she told him she was heading out, and that "it might be awhile." "I'll call later," McInturf said. She served with King as co-Public Information Officer. The pair updated Moraga residents on Nixle, Nextdoor and the town's website. McInturf left the EOC at 1 a.m. Monday, and returned to her desk Monday morning.

Ten volunteers also answered Rein's call for help. Most are members of Support 241, an MOFD-sponsored communication and logistics team. The volunteers brought dinner, snacks, water and coffee to on-duty responders, maintained contact lists, monitored radio communications, set up outdoor lighting and transported drivers who'd abandoned their cars during the Rheem Valley Shopping Center evacuation. The group contributed more than 90 hours of volunteer time in a 24 hour period.

Approximately 2,500 Moraga customers would go without natural gas service for 24 to 36 hours as the ruptured line was capped and cautiously repaired. Multiple PG&E crews worked overnight Sunday into Monday, said PG&E spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian.

"Early Monday morning, approximately 200 gas service representatives rolled in from around our service area, from Eureka to Bakersfield," she said. The EOC was shut down Monday evening just as PG&E workers began re-establishing natural gas service to its customers.

"This was a real activation, a real event, and a great learning event," Priebe said. "Everybody did a great job."

Reach the reporter at: [cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA