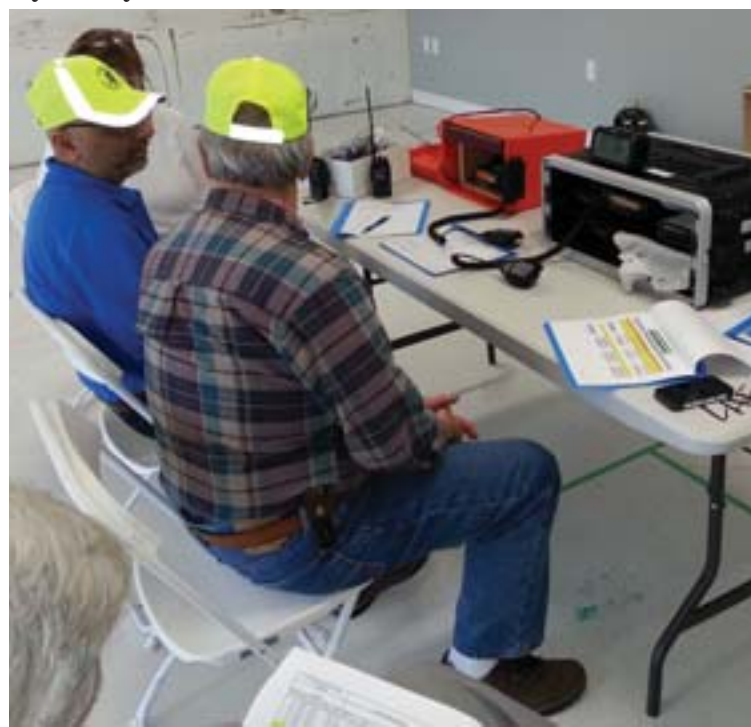


Volunteers train to talk around Lamorinda during auxiliary communications exercise

By Cathy Dausman



Once upon a Tuesday evening in Lamorinda, 26 volunteer emergency communicators spread out among five locations. Some met where Lafayette's new police station will soon be located; others were off to Moraga Town Hall and Orinda's City Hall. Still others staffed Moraga-Orinda Fire District Station 45 in downtown Orinda; the final few headed to Saint Mary's College. They opened up industrial sized suitcases, plugged in various radios and connected them to exterior antennas. Then they waited. The call came in: "This is a drill." Operation Communications Exercise, or CommEx, had begun.

Participants were told to imagine a scenario where a natural gas line had ruptured along Lafayette's Reliez Valley Road; as a result six vehicles had been destroyed and several houses had caught fire. Pleasant Hill Road was blocked. In event of an emergency, when cellular phone service becomes limited, interrupted or overwhelmed, organizations may need other means to get the message through. So Lafayette radio operators gathered information and dispersed it to their counterparts across Lamorinda over amateur radio bands, public works frequencies and General Mobile Radio Service frequencies.

"Check in! And use all frequencies to find someone," one commu-

nication leader urged his group.

"All Lamorinda agencies are working together so that we can manage emergencies that arise," said Lamorinda Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein. Rein has encouraged the Lamorinda community to standardize the radio equipment and materials each has to use.

"CommEx was a great opportunity for city and town staff to work with local amateur radio operators and Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team neighborhood leaders to exercise our auxiliary communications capabilities," Rein said. Professional emergency responders throughout Lamorinda value the drills as well as the volunteer communicators. "Having the ability to communicate and get the word out about damage from a disaster and the immediate needs whether food, water or shelter is critical to recovery success," said Orinda Chief of Police Mark Nagel.

"We have limited resources in Moraga and will need everyone's help in a major disaster," said Moraga Chief of Police Jon King. King said he was impressed with how quickly the radio equipment could be assembled and functioning.

Rein hopes this exercise is merely the first of many. His goal is to hold "at least three CommEx

practices per year, the next as early as June or July," he said.

MOFD Chief Stephen Healy calls information "the most valuable asset" at an Emergency or Department Operations Center, and said CommEx "adds tremendous value." When it comes to emergency communications, Healy believes talk is not just cheap – it is priceless.

Photo Cathy Dausman

Canyon bridge closed

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Town staff was on site rapidly and found that there was separation between the road pavement and the southeast end of the bridge, creating a visible gap. The town's geotechnical consultants were called to the site and began measuring depth and progression of the earth movement. They confirmed that the upslope hillside of the bridge presented tension cracks and continuing mass landslide movements. They observed that the gap on pavement was widening and that one of the bridge's support beams was moving and not supporting the bridge as it is supposed to. The conclusion was that the bridge had to be closed immediately.

The hillside next to the bridge, up the Lafayette-Moraga Trail and below Country Club homes at the end of Augusta Drive, has been moving since January of 2016. Whether these movements impacted the side hill and the bridge has not been addressed officially. The town manager confirmed that EBMUD, who owns the hill and the trail, has been involved in discussions with the town.

On April 27 the town council and staff held a special meeting to answer questions and dispel rumors. Several residents recommended the installation of a temporary "Bailey bridge," including the former company commander of a combat engineering company who said his group used to build Bailey bridges that could be installed in a few days.

The town manager repeated that the town's priority was the safety of

residents and the reopening of the road. Moraga resident Lance Larson insisted that a sound engineering process be followed, that site investigation should be done before any solution is decided.

Priebe asked and was granted by the council the immediate release of \$500,000 to fund studies and possible first solutions.

Moraga businesses and residents have been impacted by the closure of the bridge. The Saklan School in Moraga has several students and staff members that are coming from the Oakland/Montclair area who have been using the bridge every day.

Si Si Caffe, located on Country Club Drive, is a regular meeting place for bicyclists that roam the East Bay Hills. Owner Cathy Corsi said that the impact on her business was dramatic, especially during the weekend. The Moraga Horseman's Association representatives are also concerned with access to their horses on the south side of the bridge.

The ultimate solutions and costs are still very much unknown. One resident as well as Council Member Kymberleigh Korpus raised the issue of EBMUD's responsibility. But the town's priority is not to find whom to blame at this time, but to focus on public safety. Funding and responsibility will be addressed later.

The town created an ad-hoc page on its website to give daily updates to residents at www.Moraga.ca.us.

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