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Emergency Preparedness plans involve tapping tech

By Jennifer Wake

Several of the steps being taken by Lamorinda fire districts, police departments, local utilities and residents for what could be another historic fire season were discussed at Lafayette's virtual July 14 Emergency Preparedness Commission.

Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt outlined several technological initiatives that will help law and fire personnel during wildfire incidents. Police Services Assistant John Cornell said David Nielson, of O3 Apps, developed an app that alerts police and fire personnel on their smart phones or tablets of any fires identified through ALERTWildfire cameras in the local area. "It's still in beta mode," Cornell said, "and is currently just for first responders. David developed the app as a way to give back to the community."

Cornell helped install 34 cameras that are now linked to the ALERTWildfire system and that aid in the monitoring of ridgelines and open spaces for potential fires. Dispatch centers across California, including Contra Costa County Fire and the Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center, are doing this viewing, Cornell said in an interview after the meeting. Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein and Cornell have been working with CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) to provide internet and data at emergency command posts during power outages as well, another benefit of the network used to support the cameras. They're also working with local amateur, or "ham," radio operators who can communicate with each other and help as volunteers during an emergency.

During the meeting Alldritt said the Moraga-Orinda Fire District tested Lafayette radio station 1670AM, which will assist in broadcasting evacuation alerts and orders, and that radios purchased through a recent grant have gone out to school sites and will be located on school buses, allowing direct communication with first responders during an emergency.

Pacific Gas and Electric Company reached out to the city of Lafayette regarding the installation of a generator at the Lafayette Community Center. "PG&E wanted to provide a community resource center, and came in with an outside contractor and installed a generator transfer switch and agreed to provide a trailerized generator to the community center for the duration of fire season," Cornell said. "If needed, they'll staff the community center with PG&E volunteers during an emergency."

Cornell also had a traffic signal company put in small transfer switches allowing portable generators to be plugged into traffic lights to have a functioning traffic system during a Public Safety Power Shutoff. "By the end of August every intersection in Lafayette should be covered," Cornell said.

"We're trying to think about anything that can happen," Cornell added. "We're lucky that we have a city that backs the police department."

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Inspector Taylor King gave an update on the Firewise program, noting that four neighborhoods in Lafayette had signed up and were working to mitigate fuels on their properties. Firewise neighborhoods comprise a minimum of eight homes, with a maximum of 25, and work in a similar fashion to neighborhood watch programs, where neighbors work together toward a common cause.

Alldritt said representatives from ConFire, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the three Lamorinda police departments met in early June. "We're very concerned about wildfire season," Alldritt said. "We're trying to lean forward on this. We're doing the best we can as a small city and small police department."

Rein, who called into the meeting from an incident command post in the Sierras and was recently at the Shasta fire, said fuels are at critical levels. "If there's a little wind and a little slope, fires move quickly." He reiterated the need for everyone to help with fuel mitigation.

Alldritt said that a virtual evacuation drill is being planned for Saturday, July 31 involving ConFire, MOFD and the three Lamorinda police departments. More information will be made available on the city of Lafayette website at lovelafayette.org.

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