

Mass casualty training drill to test Tahoe crews

By Kathryn Reed

The Angora Fire of 2007 taught South Lake Tahoe officials a lot of things. But much of what needed to be improved was not implemented until this year. And those changes are about to be tested.

On Monday, a C130 airplane from the National Guard will be on the tarmac as though it crashed at Lake Tahoe Airport with more than 40 people on board. Injured passengers will be taken to Barton Memorial Hospital; others will be readied to be airlifted to regional trauma centers, though not actually flown. First responders from Reno and Sacramento have been invited to participate.

Aug. 25 is designed to be the largest drill South Lake Tahoe fire and police have had in years. Neighboring agencies will also be participating, including Barton. The recreation center will be the Red Cross center, just as it was during Angora.



South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston talks about

preparations for the Aug. 25 drill. Photos/Kathryn Reed

But it's not just the normal emergency crews that will be deployed. Other city staff members are integral to the process to make sure everything works. Planning, logistics, finance and operations are the main components. Per city code, the city manager is the incident commander, however it's the fire chief who is in charge of the local Office of Emergency Services. The planning department will lead planning, logistics falls to parks and recreation, finance is finance, and operations involves police, fire and public works.

"We really had to reinvent the emergency operations plan," Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That is one reason he was hired by City Manager Nancy Kerry – for his experience in such matters.

"My concern was since Angora the city hasn't had any ongoing training since that major event," Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I hope this becomes a regular part of the city's role and responsibility."

Communication at the start of the Angora Fire was atrocious. Part of the training has addressed that component. This also includes what is supposed to be better information getting to the media so they in turn can relay it to the public.

Evacuating the area during Angora proved to be another challenge, especially on that Tuesday when the fire jumped Highway 89 and Tahoe Keys residents were told to evacuate. The city, under Kerry's direction, ordered evacuation signs that can be installed where needed. She plans in the coming months to work neighborhood by neighborhood to acquaint people with how best to leave their home depending on where the emergency is.

Meston revamped the training manual. It details who is to do what, and who the alternates are in case that person isn't

available. He made sure everything conforms to current county, state and federal requirements. If it doesn't, there is the potential threat of state and federal dollars being withheld.

Part of the City Council chambers has been reconfigured with modernized technology.

Emergency power supply for cell phones is in place. Vests for those in charge have been bought.

Every city employee has gone through training. There is a phone tree as well as a plan to call in people who are not working at that hour. The paperwork process was simplified. Forms that need to be filled out have been put on computers to simplify the process.

All of the upgrades cost the city less than \$5,000.

In the event the airport were to be off limits as the emergency center, the city has two other locales designated in town.

Meston said every disaster – no matter where it happens – provides first responders with lessons.

“We also learned from San Francisco,” he said of the 2013 Asiana crash at SFO. “One of the important things is we try not to run over people. That is not good.”



Fire Capt. Mark WyGant with

Legos built the Lake Tahoe Airport crash scene to scale.

The drill

It will be determined that day if air space at Lake Tahoe Airport is off-limits.

The drill will involve many of the six helicopters that are within a 30-minute flight from South Lake Tahoe coming in, as well as fixed-wing aircraft. All that air support is necessary because Barton's trauma capabilities are limited and many air ambulances can take two people at the most.

Triage tags will be placed on the California Conservation Corps members who will be made up as the plane crash victims. Some will go to Barton, others to the rec center. And while normally victims would not be transported to a shelter, some concessions need to be made for a drill.

Still, it would be the Red Cross' responsibility to reunite victims with families.

One thing Meston will be looking for in his men and women is how they deal with this being a hazardous materials situation. A downed plane will have fuel that is ready to explode.

The California Highway Patrol is expected to be filming the incident from the air. This will be one way to assess how well everyone did. A debriefing will occur afterward. The drill will also be evaluated by people not affiliated with any local agency.

Adding to the potential chaos of the event is that this will be the first day of school for Lake Tahoe Unified.

And while most city resources will be devoted to this event, if there is a real emergency, those calls will take

precedence.

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Notes:

- The drill is Aug. 25 from 10am-12:30pm.
- The training takes place at Lake Tahoe Airport, Barton Memorial Hospital and South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center.
- To sign up for reverse 911 notifications in El Dorado County go online, then click on the image of the phone, cell phone and “@” symbol to fill out the form. Here is a link for Douglas County residents to sign up. South Lake Tahoe residents may signup here for various alerts.