

Communitywide approach to disaster preparedness

By Kathryn Reed

When home is on the other side of a wall of fire that is headed your direction the choices can seem bleak.

This was what several people encountered during the South Shore's 2007 Angora Fire. They were working at Camp Richardson on that Tuesday in June when the fire jumped Highway 89.

The marina fired up the Sky King, an 18-passenger boat it uses as a water taxi, and ferried employees and guests to the Tahoe Keys Marina – out of harm's way.

This is what it means to be prepared and not have to rely on others to be rescued.

With catastrophic disasters becoming more common, South Lake Tahoe officials aren't waiting for the next Angora – or worse – to occur here. City Manager Nancy Kerry on Dec. 8 convened dozens of leaders to talk about having a communitywide approach to disaster preparedness and not just a government response.

"I want to be as efficient and coordinated as we can be," Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. She said collaboration hasn't always been a strong suit here, with people operating in silos.

An immediate outcome is South Tahoe Public Utility District is going to hold off on purchasing new communication's equipment to see what direction the city decides to go in next year. This is ideally so they would be compatible with one another.



South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston talks Dec. 8 about the catastrophic threats to the region. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Fire Chief Jeff Meston lamented how inadequate communications systems are within the city as well as between key players in California and Nevada. While cell phones can work, they are limiting at times because service here can be sketchy. And without cell towers that can survive a fire, that line of communication can be eliminated.

Last winter the city opened its emergency operations center more than once because of the dangerous weather. Gaps in knowledge, information and communications were revealed. Internally changes have been made.

Friday was about working on external changes. At the meeting were reps from private business, religious organizations, lodging, California Tahoe Conservancy, Lake Tahoe Unified School District, Tahoe Transportation District, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, STPUD, El Dorado County, and Barton Health.

The city is hoping to create written partnerships with many of these people. It could be as simple as Camp Richardson

pledging boats when needed or a hotel offering lodging for evacuees.

“We are always willing to help out with any of our vessels when we can for public needs,” Bob Hassett, who owns Camp Rich Marina, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Having the written agreements helps with federal reimbursements. It also prevents price gauging in the moment.

Meston listed sobering statistics about how much public safety personnel exists throughout the South Shore. That’s why he says it’s imperative residents be prepared to fend for themselves for 72 hours in a disaster because it could take that long for help to arrive.

More disturbing is that help from outside the area may not arrive – at least not in a timely manner. Meston pointed out how during this fall’s Wine Country fires 305 fire engines were requested and only 130 responded in the first 12 hours. Resources eventually came from as far away as Australia.

In 2012 there were 134 unfilled mutual aid requests. In 2017 there have been 6,000.

There are more situations, resources are stretched thin and local areas worry more about needing to protect their own. Then there is the fact the disasters are more horrific – think the current conflagration in Southern California.

Meston said there have been 15 catastrophes this year that each has exceeded \$1 billion in destruction.

“The common denominator is climate change. That’s not going to change anytime soon,” Meston said. “Hurricanes and wildfires are the most catastrophic. Climate change has really changed our business.”

Fire season, especially in California, is now year round.

While fire is one of the biggest threats to the Tahoe basin, it's not the only one. A seiche, or lake tsunami, is a very real possibility if any one of the earthquake faults moves in a significant manner. The lake water would act like a bath tub, sloshing back and forth in a deadly manner.

Terrorism is possible. In August 2001, Earth Liberation Front claimed responsibility for trying to bring down the Heavenly gondola by tying logs to the cable.

While the presentation was sobering, the goal was hopeful – prepare now as a community so the impact is less and the healing can begin that much sooner.