



When the Big One Comes Will We Respond with a Bang or a Whimper?

Disaster Preparedness

General Background and Introduction

A catastrophic earthquake will hit the Bay Area by April. The earthquake is certain, only the year is unknown. Experts forecast a 70% probability that a magnitude 6.7 or greater earthquake will shake the Bay Area by the year 2030. Is the County prepared to respond?

Recent events resulting from Katrina and other worldwide disasters have made everyone more concerned about the state of our preparedness. It is likely, though, that this concern will dissipate with time. The risks will not.

A community's disaster response plan might be well documented, but that does not guarantee it will be well executed. It is not expected that all county departments, cities, or special districts will be as well trained as the Menlo Park Fire District, which sponsors the California Task Force 3 Urban Search and Rescue Team. All county departments, cities, and special districts must, however, plan so that when a disaster strikes, they can respond effectively. That means being prepared, having communications in place, building relationships with like entities, and making sure that leaders are trained to act quickly and efficiently.

Leadership Matters

The effectiveness of any emergency response is derived ultimately from those in charge. It is the leaders who must require and oversee planning for emergency response, who must allocate sufficient resources and adequately prepare personnel, and who must give high priority to training. It is the leaders who must assure the coordination of all the departments and agencies that are responsible for emergency planning, response, mitigation, and recovery. Not insignificantly, the leaders must know their own roles in an emergency.

The County's response to a disaster will be directly proportional to its level of preparedness. The level of preparedness will be directly proportional to the leadership provided in the County. Unless the leaders of the County are prepared to suffer the same anger and scorn recently directed at the leaders of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) following Hurricane Katrina, they must provide the necessary leadership now.

But Individual Preparedness Counts Too

In a recent cable television program Stephen Colbert, in a parody of anchor news commentary on FEMA, suggested invigorating the organization by renaming it the Storm Accident and Viral Emergency Unconditional Relief Support and Emendation of Loss Federation (SAVE UR SELF). "Save yourself" is not as foolish a motto as Colbert's humor suggests. The San Mateo County Health Department has distributed throughout the County an informative *Pocket Guide to Emergency Preparedness*, emphasizing that "your best protection is preparation." This small, comprehensive guide offers specific tips for preparing a household emergency plan and lists emergency supplies that residents can easily assemble and keep in their homes. The Red Cross has recently recommended that such emergency kits include at least a one-week supply of food, water, and prescription medicines. The Health Officer of San Mateo County has suggested a two-week supply.

Colbert's fictitious acronym also suggests the name of crucial real organizations, such as CERT (Community Emergency Response Team), CERPP (Citizens Emergency Response and Preparedness Program), and NERT (Neighborhood Emergency Response Team). These are vital programs, in which citizens can learn to save themselves and their neighbors by planning their individual disaster and emergency responses. Too often the significance of these community groups is overlooked. The San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) believes that the Board of Supervisors and city councils must take a leadership role in promoting the spread of these organizations throughout the County.

Disaster-Prone San Mateo County

In a recent newspaper article the director of the San Mateo County Sheriff's Area Office of Emergency Services and Homeland Security characterized California as "an act-of-God theme park." Indeed, San Mateo County, as the epicenter of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, can lay claim to being one of the scariest rides in this park. In addition to the inevitable earthquakes generated by its proximity to the San Andreas and other major faults, the County is at risk from various other natural and manmade catastrophes:

- flooding and landslides during frequent major winter storms
- flooding by breaching of old and weak levees
- a Tsunami on sections of the San Mateo Coast

- wildfire in drought years in the acres of mountain grasslands and trees subject to prevailing strong southerly winds
- a possible pandemic brought in through San Francisco International Airport (SFO), where over 10,000 passengers arrive daily from Asia
- a major airline crash in the heavily populated areas surrounding SFO
- the possibility of a terrorist attack.

Function and Role of the Office of Emergency Services

In San Mateo County, the Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES) is the primary agency responsible for minimizing the effects of disasters and major emergencies on the citizens of the County. The OES is responsible for the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), which describes the County's planned response to extraordinary emergencies associated with natural disasters, man-made technological incidents, and national security alerts. The EOP includes procedures for organizing and operating the County's Emergency Operations Center (EOC), where members of the response team manage the County's actions in a disaster. The OES staff also provides planning and training services to the 20 cities in the County.

The OES is funded through a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) between the 20 incorporated cities and the County of San Mateo. The cities contribute money to the JPA based upon a formula that takes into account the population and average assessed property value of each city. The County then matches the cities' contribution. The remainder of the OES budget comes from state and federal Emergency Management Assistance program funds.

The Joint Powers Agreement is governed by an Emergency Services Council. This council comprises one representative from each city plus a member of the County Board of Supervisors. The Council approves budgets and provides strategic direction for the Joint Powers Agreement.

The Grand Jury Disaster Readiness Investigations

Following the Katrina disaster, the Grand Jury decided to investigate how well the County was prepared for a disaster in several specific areas. These independent studies resulted in six reports, which considered the following issues

1. The training of city residents in disaster preparedness
2. The readiness of Special Districts
3. The readiness of the San Francisco International Airport (SFO)
4. The care of students at the County's public schools in a disaster
5. The adequacy of law enforcement radio networks
6. The readiness of SamTrans, Public Works, and Environmental Services

The reports follow this introduction.

While these reports all have their own conclusions and recommendations, the Grand Jury's overall conclusion is that the County can be only as prepared as it has the political will to be.

The Grand Jury realizes that it has merely touched upon this enormous issue, but it can say the following with confidence:

- It is better at all levels to prepare before an emergency rather than to react during one.
- It is better to communicate and build professional relationships before an emergency rather than trying to do so during an emergency.
- Leadership matters, both before and during an emergency.
- Resources are scarce, but the mission is vital.