

BIRCH BAY EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS TASK FORCE

2/20/2013

A new Task Force gathered to further the efforts of the one that functioned under the Public Safety, Schools and Transportation Sub-Committee of the Birch Bay Steering Committee several years ago.

Representatives attending (in no particular order):

Kathy Berg, Chair, Birch Bay Steering Committee

Doralee Booth, Vice Chair, Birch Bay Steering Committee and Chair, Public Safety, Schools and Transportation Sub-Committee

Ken Richardson, Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management

Kent Catlin, Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management

Henry Hollander, Division Chief, North Whatcom Fire and Rescue

Michael Abendhoff, Government and Public Affairs, BP Refinery

Iain Buchanan, Manager, Birch Bay Water Slides and Board Member, Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce

Mavis Dalzell, Partner Services Lead, Mt. Baker Chapter American Red Cross (ARC)

Terry Terry, Emergency Management Coordinator, Lummi Island

Tim Theissen, Pastor, Birch Bay Bible Community Church

Ruth Higgins, former Task Force Leader (volunteer recording secretary)

Representatives unable to attend this meeting:

Ron Anderson, District Fire Chief, North Whatcom Fire and Rescue

Dean Crosswhite, Division Chief, Fire District 7

Triggering Events: Kathy Berg opened the meeting by describing the two 2012 events in Birch Bay that highlighted the need for a more effective plan for communication and action for the safety of residents and visitors during potential disasters. These were:

1. BP Refinery Fire - 2/17: Information on the extent of the fire and advice on the best response was difficult to obtain and what was learned came from a Seattle television station. Kathy and Doralee, two of the best informed members of the community, were not sure whether sheltering in place or evacuation was the right thing to do, and recognized that if they were unsure, newcomers or visitors would be completely uninformed.
2. King Tide - 12/17: The several elements that came together to create "the perfect storm" on the morning of 12/17 again raised questions about what should we do, what should we know and how do we get that information.

Because Birch Bay is a resort area where the population doubles or quadruples over the summer, Kathy said that a warning system should be a high priority. She noted the need to broadly distribute information about how the system sounds and what individuals should do when they hear it.

Representatives briefly outlined their agency connection and role, and what they could offer the Birch Bay community in its search for an improved plan for managing emergencies in this unincorporated locale.

1. Ken Richardson and Kent Catlin, Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management (DEM), outlined the many procedures for public communication already in place, including:
 - a. Reverse 911 system: MyStateUSA, a software program that calls everyone registered--which can be done through WhatcomReady.org--and can include cell phones as well as land lines. However, it may take 20 to 60 minutes to complete a list, depending on how large it is for a given area.
 - b. Social Media: FaceBook, Twitter and other internet based applications for sharing information through connected communities or networks.
 - c. AM and NOAA Weather Radio and Television stations:
 - d. Sheriff's Deputies and volunteers go door-to-door
 - e. Comcast subscribers Emergency Alert System

They also mentioned that work is progressing on designating tsunami evacuation routes for this area, which, they pointed out, are very specific and don't necessarily apply to all emergencies. The Department of National Resources have tsunami-risk maps.

The alternative to evacuation is shelter-in-place; DEM and ARC both provide emergency preparedness training, which includes how to know when to follow which process.

2. Mavis Dalzell, on behalf of the Mt. Baker Chapter of the American Red Cross, outlined some of their activities related to emergencies, which she pointed out is the ARC's sole focus:
 - a. ARC gets involved upon notification from the Division of Emergency Management
 - b. Mass shelters, which have been designated and stocked with cots, blankets, etc., are contacted.
 - c. Trained volunteers are notified and report to the designated shelter
 - d. ARC partners with the Salvation Army for meal preparation

3. Terry Terry, Emergency Management Coordinator, Lummi Island, described their experience:
 - a. Lummi Island was selected as a demonstration project for Map Your Neighborhood (MYN), which consisted of dividing the island into zones and neighborhoods (the boundaries were what could be walked in an hour). Within those neighborhoods, they inventoried what skills and equipment residents had and designated a meeting place. They created a parallel structure of shelters, fuel concerns, water supply, food storage, communications (Ham radio operators), CERT training, liaison with the Coast Guard and Navy; implementing a float plane plan.
 - b. The next step was to perform a table top exercise.
 - c. A formal Island-wide exercise did not occur as hoped.

d. An information pot-luck was held with Brian Atwater, a tsunami expert, presenting his historical background of tsunamis in general and the 2004 Malaysian tsunami in particular.

The Task Force members discussed the highest probability risks: flooding and earthquake; the value of having teams of CERT trained residents available to assist first responders during emergencies; the role of citizen volunteers in supporting the North Whatcom Fire and Rescue when all their personnel are involved in responses (office tasks, meals, first aid); the existence of a Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD) that meets community needs where DEM can't (it is focusing on small business emergency management plans and works with animal care organizations); noting that the most reliable form of communication is texting; and the Safe and Well program that enables victims and those concerned about them to register on their Web site www.safeandwell.communityos.org.

Conclusions: The group learned much from each other and would find it valuable to continue working on the goal of creating a more effective plan for communication and action for the safety of residents and visitors during potential disasters.

The next meeting will be held on March 20, 2013 at 2:00 p.m. at Station 63, 4581 Birch Bay Lynden RD, Blaine.

Submitted by
Ruth Higgins for
Kathy Berg, Chair

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