

Review of Oakmont Fire Response
October 27, 2017
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The OEPC conducted a review of the fire and the emergency response efforts on 10/26. Present at the meeting were OEPC board members Pat Barclay, Fred Polkinghorn, Tony Lukes, Bob Stinson, Dennis Sabourin, Jan Young, Jim Ouimette, and OVA BoD rep. Lynda Oneto. A summary of the discussion follows:

1. The recent fire has been described as a once-in-a-lifetime event. Driven by winds, the fire progressed from Highway 128 (the Nuns fire origin) to Santa Rosa in only 4 hours. County and City emergency responders were overwhelmed with the number of fires and the rate at which they spread and fire-related information was difficult to ascertain with any degree of accuracy. This was further complicated by the time; wildfires such as this are rare occurrences at night when winds are typically calm.
2. The Sonoma County reverse 911 system (SoCoAlert) issued an evacuation order for Oakmont at 3:18 am. In conversations with residents, it is distressing that many residents are still unaware of the system and/or have failed to sign up despite OEPC efforts over the past 2 years to get Oakmonters to sign up. The OVA BoD rep. stated that she will address with the BoD to encourage residents to subscribe to this free service. Sadly, SoCoAlert did not work for some residents due to loss of cell towers to fire, and loss of VOIP landlines when the power/internet was lost.
3. Likewise, a number of residents do not have "go kits" with food, water, clothing, prescriptions, emergency radio, etc. to take with them in the event of an evacuation. Again, this despite OEPC efforts to educate residents on the need. In addition, a number of residents did not know how to open their garage doors when the power is out. The OEPC has discussed this in our past forums and it is on the list of items that COPE leaders discuss with their neighborhood residents.

4. Approx. 20 neighborhood communications volunteers (aka Zone Communicators, ZCs) walked their neighborhood areas to advise residents on actions to take. Tony Lukes - who manages our ZC team - and his wife activated the ZC network and walked the local neighborhoods knocking on the doors of approx. 2 dozen residences to alert occupants of the danger. Unfortunately there was little other information for the ZCs to convey since city & county services were overwhelmed. Sadly, we only have sufficient Zone Communicators to cover half of Oakmont, and even then most areas have no backups in the event an operator is out of town or otherwise unavailable. Having sufficient resident volunteers has been and continues to be problematic in providing an adequate emergency response capability for our community.
5. Our amateur radio communications director (Fred Polkinghorn) activated the Oakmont emergency ham network in an effort to provide information/direction to residents. He was instrumental in providing evacuation directions to several residents.
6. Additional OEPC review meetings will be held with our communications volunteers (approx. 80 residents) to gain additional insights and suggestions.
7. Based on input from the SRFD, the OEPC (again through Oakmont News articles and/or e-blast) has provided advise to residents on how to respond to a wildfire:
 - If you see a fire and don't see emergency responders, call 911
 - If you see a fire and DO see emergency responders, do NOT call 911
 - If you see a fire and feel at all threatened, leave Oakmont immediately. Do not wait to pack items, etc. - just grab your pet and your significant other, get in your car, and go.
 - Tune to radio stations KZST or KSRO for further information.

It appears that many residents did not heed this advise.

8. There were reports of many residents congregating at the Berger Center, expecting the Center to be opened as a shelter(?) It is unclear why those residents chose to go there. One suggestion was a possible expectation that the Berger would be opened as a shelter, possibly by the Red

- Cross. This is an erroneous expectation, since the Berger Center was equally at risk, and the Red Cross would not be opening a shelter that quickly and not in an area at risk.
9. Several committee members commented that KSRO was an invaluable source of real-time information on the fire and evacuation notices. Residents would have benefited from listening to those stations for up-to-date reports. (KZST went off the air when they were forced to evacuate, but KSRO continued to broadcast fire-related info 24/7 for several days.)

Conclusions

- It is impossible to prepare for every possible emergency.
This fire was a classic example – an event that was never anticipated by the City or County. For residents to help ensure their survival, they need to take personal responsibility for preparing for a disaster, and to follow the advise/orders of City and County emergency services personnel. Several Oakmont residents chose not to evacuate, putting themselves and first responders in jeopardy. And many more do not have “go-bags” to take with them in an emergency and left home with little more than the clothes on their backs.
- Notification to residents was clearly problematic with this fire. It was suggested that the City/County look into installing emergency sirens within Oakmont to alert residents of such situations, and to have the OVA BoD follow up with those orgs. to get it implemented.
- To aid in communicating emergency-related reports to residents, there were 2 suggestions:
 - Use the e-blast to communicate emergency-related information on a regular (daily?) basis.
 - Have ON reporters get press credentials that would allow them to access restricted areas (e.g. Oakmont under evacuation) to facilitate reports to residents.
- Encourage residents to adhere to emergency preparation and response recommendations. The OVA BoD should take an active role in addressing this.
- Encourage residents to take a more active role in emergency preparation and response, e.g. volunteering with COPE and

OEPC. The current lack of volunteers results in little to no depth in our ability to assist residents in the event of a disaster, like the one we just experienced.

- The OVA should consider hosting a resident town hall to review the good, the bad and different regarding the event. The theme of the meeting should be to find answers not point blame. Yes, some things could be improved and much was done right. There was no loss of life and minimal loss of property; it clearly could have been much worse and we owe the first responders a huge vote of thanks. Let's look forward and use lessons learned to prepare for the next disaster.
- Recognize and thank existing resident volunteers for their participation in Oakmont emergency-related activities. These volunteers operate "under the radar" for the most part, and their efforts are generally not understood and/or appreciated by the community as a whole.