

WEATHERING A DISASTER

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury investigated a complaint that questioned if the roads and bridges in Sonoma County are adequate to meet the emergency needs of rural residents in the event of a disaster. The investigation included the disaster preparedness of the County and its outreach to the public.

The natural disasters that threaten our County can include floods, landslides, wild fires, and major earthquakes. Following a disaster, communities and individuals could be without water, power, sewer, communications services, and access to medical aid, food, and supplies for a week or more. Damaged bridges and roads could render evacuation and supply routes impassable.

The Sonoma County Fire and Emergency Services Department (Emergency Services) developed the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), located in Santa Rosa. The EOC serves as the County emergency command post to coordinate disaster response operations. With respect to public disaster preparedness, Emergency Services relies heavily on websites and the Internet to inform the public. A more comprehensive outreach program may be needed to help County residents prepare for a disaster.

“Be prepared,” the motto, is as true today as it was a century ago. The occurrence of any widespread disaster can cause extensive damage to the County infrastructure resulting in injuries, loss of life, and property damage. For example, the County floods of 2005-2006, that were declared a national disaster, closed over 100 roadways, caused an extended loss of power for almost 50,000 residents, and flooded over 2,000 properties.

Individual, family, and community emergency preparedness plans are the best protection. Maintaining a stored supply of water, food, medical supplies, basic survival equipment, and awareness of evacuation routes will provide a critical safety net until help can arrive. Families, neighbors, and communities are often the real first responders during a disaster and must rely on each other to weather through it.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury received a complaint from a citizen who was concerned that severe damage to rural roads and bridges in the event of a disaster could affect the County’s ability to provide emergency response services and supplies to isolated residents. The County is subject to potential natural disasters that pose possible hazards to the residents, particularly in rural areas.



APPROACH

The Grand Jury interviewed officials of the Sonoma County Public Works Department (Public Works), Emergency Services, EOC, several rural fire agencies, and the Sonoma County Human Services Department. We visited many County facilities, reviewed documents provided by the County and independent sources, and researched various media resources.

DISCUSSION

Bridges and Roads

The County Road System includes all County-owned bridges and roads. Bridges and roads are vital to provide safe passage and emergency services. Some of our bridges and roads may not withstand the impact of a disaster.

Many of the 330 County bridges are in need of repair, upgrade, or replacement, and all require ongoing maintenance, which is a significant undertaking. Caltrans, on a two-year cycle, inspects and assigns a structural rating to California bridges. The Caltrans structural rating and the ongoing local inspections are the basis for the County bridge repair, replacement, rehabilitation, seismic retrofit, and maintenance programs. Funding for County bridges is complex, and comes primarily from the Federal bridge programs administered by Caltrans. These programs require the County to match funds. At one time, the State provided the required matching funds. Due to budget cuts, the State has suspended some funding, which has affected local bridge projects.

Many rural roads have fallen into disrepair after years of neglect and underfunding, and some have deteriorated to a crisis condition. Impassable roads can hamper emergency response, evacuation, medical care, and fire response efforts. The citizens' group, Save Our Sonoma Roads, focused public attention on the serious disrepair of County roads by hosting public forums, attending meetings of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS), participating in the Ad Hoc Roads Committee, and contacting the media. Public involvement can keep the BOS focused on the need to increase funding for bridges and roads.

Public Works estimates that approximately \$920 million will be required for road maintenance over the next ten years. The BOS allocated \$15.5 million from the General Fund to County road maintenance in fiscal year 2012-2013. If the same amount were allocated annually for the next ten years, \$155 million would be available for road maintenance. This allocation still falls far short of what is needed.

Emergency Management

Emergency Services is responsible for fire services and emergency management and addressing the needs of the County with disaster planning and outreach programs. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the State have programs to assist local governments prepare for and respond to disasters.

FEMA acknowledges that government response alone is not enough to meet the challenges arising from a catastrophe. FEMA recommends "Whole Community Planning": an approach to emergency management that includes federal, state, county, and city representation, non-governmental

organizations, faith-based and non-profit groups, and the private sector. Individuals, families, neighbors, and communities continue to be the most important assets as first responders during a disaster.

The County Emergency Operations Plan incorporates FEMA’s “Whole Community Planning” approach. This plan ensures effective emergency operations management by creating policies, procedures, and assigning responsibilities. It established the EOC and designated it as the command post to coordinate communications among all involved agencies for the duration of an emergency. The County has also created an Emergency Coordinators Forum that includes representatives from County and City departments, schools, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, the State, U.S. Coast Guard, law enforcement, County Volunteer Center, and the community, who participate in discussions and planning meetings.

The EOC staff is trained in preparedness and disaster response through the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS). All County employees are trained as on-call emergency responders and are required by law to report to duty when a disaster occurs. Local government entities must use SEMS to be eligible for any reimbursement of response-related costs under the State disaster assistance programs.

The Telephone Emergency Notification System (TENS) is an automated emergency alert system that notifies participants in the event of an emergency. The system is currently being updated and tested to allow residents to register their land lines and cell phones to receive automated emergency alert messages. The EOC will announce the availability of the system to the public when it is ready for use.

The County Human Services Department is responsible for emergency care and shelter and has an agreement designating the American Red Cross as the provider of these services. The American Red Cross has identified 120-150 potential shelter locations throughout the County, and is responsible for the development of facilities, the training of shelter staff, and the operation of shelters in an emergency.

Communities can become safer and better prepared to respond to disasters through public education and training. However, no single County agency is taking responsibility for preparedness training for the public. Volunteer programs could teach preparedness skills and promote whole community support. In a survey conducted by Emergency Services in 2011, participants identified the lack of grassroots support, funding, and liability issues as barriers that make these programs difficult to sustain. Emergency Services could provide education and training if the County would allocate funding.

Emergency Services relies heavily on its website to provide disaster preparation information to the public. The County has printed emergency and disaster preparedness information available at some public events and numerous County facilities. Of the informational materials available at the office of Emergency Services, the “Pocket Guide to Emergency Preparedness” is a particularly convenient and comprehensive resource. Residents must take the initiative to seek out information for themselves.

FINDINGS

- F1. The County Road System is underfunded.
- F2. Some rural roads have deteriorated to a crisis condition, which could delay response time in case of a disaster.

- F3. Short-term and long-term solutions to the road crisis require collaboration among County residents, businesses, and elected officials.
- F4. The County has developed an organized disaster response plan.
- F5. The Telephone Emergency Notification System is vital for public notification.
- F6. Public disaster education and preparedness are essential to minimize risks and increase the chances of weathering a catastrophe.
- F7. The County lacks an outreach program to educate the residents of the need to prepare for the aftermath of a disaster in rural areas.
- F8. Trained volunteers are a critical component in providing service at the time of an emergency.
- F9. There is no single County agency taking responsibility for public disaster preparedness training.
- F10. There is a lack of funds to support training programs to help residents prepare for a disaster.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. The Board of Supervisors provide a continuing protected source of revenue to improve and maintain the deteriorating County Road System.
- R2. The Fire and Emergency Services Department monitor the progress of the Telephone Emergency Notification System and devote resources to inform the public of the activation and benefit of the system.
- R3. The Fire and Emergency Services Department work with the Board of Supervisors to create and continually fund a position dedicated to outreach education and disaster preparation of residents.
- R4. The Department of Health Services update the “Pocket Guide to Emergency Preparedness” and continue to maintain it with current information.
- R5. The Fire and Emergency Services Department develop a program to distribute the “Pocket Guide to Emergency Preparedness,” particularly to rural residents.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 - Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
- R2, R3, R5 - Sonoma County Fire and Emergency Services Department Director
- R4 - Sonoma County Director of Health Services

The governing body indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Sonoma County 2012 Annual Report - Investing In a Better Future
- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors - 2012 and 2013 meeting agendas, minutes, and packets
- Sonoma County - 2011 Hazard Mitigation Plan
- Caltrans Sonoma County District 04 Structure Maintenance and Investigations - February 2013
- Caltrans Sonoma County District 04 Structure Maintenance and Investigations - June 2012
- Department of Transportation and Public Works - The Bridges of Sonoma County - 2009 Strategic Planning
- Sonoma County Department of Health Services - “Pocket Guide to Emergency Preparedness,” - 2007 version

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.