

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER

How Many More Delays?

SUMMARY

Emergency preparedness in Santa Barbara County is in need of a reevaluation, and a touch of creativity. Virtually all County officials agree the current interim Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is inadequate, and yet the Office of Emergency Services (OES) is reluctant to find a better location. A major earthquake or pandemic flu could come at any time. Now is the time to take a new look at emergency preparedness and a dedicated EOC to protect the entire County.

Two major fires severely impacted the South County in 2008. These fires could have led to other disasters, such as massive mud slides. We all know that some day a major earthquake will occur. The only question is when. To manage all the County agencies that might deal with emergencies, it is critical that we establish an EOC that is dedicated, protected, efficient, and large enough to accommodate all necessary personnel. The 2005-2006 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury investigated the EOC, and recommended that a new EOC be recognized by the County as a high priority, with funds allocated to build it. The County OES and the Board of Supervisors agreed. And yet, in 2009 the County still is operating at the same location, with temporary, modular buildings which might not withstand a moderate earthquake. Once an emergency occurs, it currently takes two to three hours to set up the EOC in these buildings. Even if funds were allocated and disbursed today, it could be years before a new EOC is constructed. To ensure adequate coordination in the wake of all types of emergencies, a more secure dedicated EOC must be established now.

BACKGROUND

In an emergency, the first senior person on the scene becomes the Incident Commander. It is this person's responsibility to notify key people in the County that an emergency has occurred, and where the emergency is located. The Incident Commander will notify the Sheriff's Department, which in turn will notify the County Chief Executive Officer (CEO), or in his absence the Assistant CEO or Director of the Office of Emergency Services (OES). One of these people or the Sheriff or the Fire Chief has the authority to activate the EOC. When it is activated, relevant agencies are called upon to participate.

Although the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is not an incident command post, it is essential in an emergency to coordinate response and recovery actions and resources. It is not used to direct an operation; rather, it is the center where coordination and

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management decisions are facilitated. The departments involved may vary depending on the emergency, but generally include Red Cross, animal shelters, schools, and county departments involving finance, logistics, communications, operations and web tasking.

Each step in the activation is critical, and each player is essential. Santa Barbara County does not have an EOC which is dedicated, equipped and ready to run at the outset of an emergency.

The County has identified a number of potential emergency scenarios, any of which would require the activation of an EOC:

- Fire
- Population displacement (e.g. Los Angeles)
- Terrorist attack
- Extreme high and low temperature
- Dam or levee failure
- Missile incident
- Industrial accident/explosion
- Hazmat spill
- Flood
- Landslide
- Tsunami
- Nuclear incident (Diablo Canyon)
- Airline crash
- Earthquake

The Grand Jury recognizes that it will never be a question of IF there will be another emergency, it will always be WHEN. There will be another fire. There will be a major earthquake. The county must be fully prepared when any emergency hits.

Since July 1, 2008 there have been two major fires in Santa Barbara County – the Gap Fire and the Tea Fire. The 2008-2009 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury investigated the current EOC to observe how it operates during an emergency.

METHODOLOGY

In conducting its investigation, the Grand Jury interviewed the following:

- Senior officials in both the County Fire and Sheriff's Departments
- City of Goleta Public Information Officer (PIO)
- Mayor and City Manager, City of Goleta
- Santa Barbara County Executives:
 - Director of the OES
 - CEO and Assistant CEO
 - Director and Assistant Director, General Services Department
- Leaders of the Emergency Public Information Center (EPIC)
- Two County Supervisors who were directly affected by the two fires
- OES Director, San Luis Obispo County
- Program Administrator for the Ventura County OES

In addition, the Grand Jury visited the following sites:

- The Santa Barbara County EOC during the first full day of the Tea Fire
- The Joint Information Center (JIC) during the Tea Fire
- The Sheriff's Department Operations Center (DOC) and one of its command vehicles
- The Ventura County EOC
- Potential sites for an interim, dedicated EOC in Santa Barbara County

The Grand Jury was provided details regarding building a new EOC north of Cathedral Oaks Road in Santa Barbara County.

While the Grand Jury had the opportunity to observe how the EOC personnel operated during two fires, the focus of the Jury was on all types of emergencies and was not limited to fires.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The Grand Jury has high praise for the actions of the fire departments and the Sheriff's Department in dealing with both the Gap Fire and the Tea Fire. Interagency cooperation also was apparent, as units from other counties were on-site almost immediately. Emergency drills on the Riviera and Mission Canyon resulted in efficient evacuations in Santa Barbara. The Sheriff's Department notified a number of residents through its Reverse 911[®] system, and did an exemplary job implementing evacuations. Representatives from multiple private and public agencies, such as the Red Cross and animal shelters, also responded quickly and efficiently.

The current EOC is located in modular buildings supported by concrete piers. It is situated in a parking lot adjacent to the Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Services building on Camino Del Remedio in Santa Barbara. It is questionable whether the buildings could withstand even a moderate earthquake. The EOC occupies 3,670 square feet, including hallways and restrooms. The buildings are generally used as the County Employees' University site, and then converted to an EOC during an emergency.

The 2005-2006 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury evaluated emergency preparedness in considerable detail, and published a report entitled *Santa Barbara County Emergency Operations Center – Up and Ready or Down and Out*. Finding 1 was "The Santa Barbara County EOC is housed in a temporary modular building that is not rated for an emergency government function and could fail in an earthquake." The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, the CEO and the Fire Department all agreed with this finding.

Recommendation 1 from that report stated: "The Board of Supervisors and County Administration should immediately prioritize the process of identifying a new site for the EOC that meets construction standards for emergency government functions." The Board

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of Supervisors, the CEO and the Fire Department all stated that this recommendation “had been implemented”. The response went on to say that a new site had been identified at the Santa Ynez Airport. The Board of Supervisors had allocated \$3 million for the construction of a new EOC at that site. An additional \$300,000 was committed by the Sheriff, and \$1.7 million could be allocated based on the financial health of the County’s General Fund. This meant \$5 million had been committed for the project. This response was premature. The Santa Ynez Airport is no longer being considered as a site for a dedicated EOC.

The 2005-2006 Grand Jury report also stated: “Procrastination of this effort places our county at risk of not having a functioning EOC during a major disaster.”

In early 2007, the County contracted with an outside consultant specializing in EOC designs to conduct a feasibility study¹ regarding cost and location for an EOC. They researched three locations: the Santa Ynez Airport, an extension to the Betteravia Government Center in Santa Maria, and a new site north of Cathedral Oaks Road in Santa Barbara. The report recommended the Cathedral Oaks location, and a size of 12,740 square feet, or approximately three and a half times as large as the current EOC. In an effort to save money, the size was reduced to 9,300 square feet, or an EOC two and a half times the size of the current one. The estimated cost was \$7.8 million. The Cathedral Oaks site was then reevaluated by the General Services Department of the County, which concluded that the cost would be \$6.7 million.

Sufficient funds have been set aside by the County to cover this cost, and the City of Goleta, while not committing, has expressed an interest in contributing \$750,000 to the construction of the EOC. In early 2009, the financial picture changed. Financial problems in other County departments, a reduction in anticipated property tax revenue as a result of a decline in the property tax assessments and the loss of valuable property in the Tea Fire, and anticipated reductions in revenue from the State as a result of the new California budget, make the spending of approximately \$7 million unlikely in the near future. It also is possible, however, that the new Federal stimulus bill will help fund permanent EOCs in both the North and South County. When money might be made available is still uncertain. Once funds are released, construction could take from 18 months to more than three years. The Board of Supervisors has put the construction of a permanent, dedicated EOC on hold.

According to his memos and presentations to the Board of Supervisors, the Director of General Services looked at several sites in comparison to the new, proposed 9,300 square-foot EOC north of Cathedral Oaks. Understandably, all alternative sites fell short. Given the numerous deficiencies of the current EOC, and the fact that a permanent EOC may not be built for several years, the Grand Jury has taken a different approach. Instead of comparing to the Cathedral Oaks site, the Jury compared alternative existing buildings to the current 3,670 square-foot interim EOC. This opens up more possibilities.

¹ The Austin Company, “Site Evaluation/Feasibility Study, County of Santa Barbara Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Project”, May 15, 2007

As a point of comparison, San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties both have permanent dedicated EOCs which are each approximately 6,000 square feet in size. The Director of the Santa Barbara OES has not toured either adjacent county's EOC to evaluate the space requirements for a facility in Santa Barbara.

Issues to be Considered for a New EOC

It has been suggested that a physical EOC is not critical in an era of easy communication; telephones and websites could replace the need for an EOC. This argument ignores the need for active coordination of different agencies in an emergency. The Fire and Sheriff's Departments, the CEO and the Director of the OES all see the need for a dedicated EOC which can be staffed 24/7 in an emergency. The primary function of the EOC is not to direct emergency actions, but to coordinate the efforts of many diverse agencies. Communication and coordination are facilitated by having all representatives in the same room. Telephones and websites cannot duplicate the advantage of all these departments working in close proximity.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Emergency Operations Handbook (CPG 1-20) lists several requirements for the construction of an EOC. It should be close to the heart of government offices, be located away from fault lines, be located in a building meeting stringent seismic structural codes, not be located in a flood zone, and be distant from hazardous materials storage facilities, nuclear plants or toxic waste transportation routes. It should be centrally located, with good road access. The existing EOC does not meet these standards.

The Jury has been told that as an interim measure, tents have been purchased which could be used in the event the current EOC is inoperable. The Jury does not consider tents to be an adequate solution. They would need to be set up and there would be a delay in activating an EOC.

In the Jury's opinion, inadequate attention has been paid to determine if any existing building in the County can be used as an interim EOC. If a suitable location were found, a new interim EOC could be up and running in short order. There are numerous sites greater than the size of the current 3,670 square foot EOC and which meet seismic standards, but may not meet an "essential services building" standard. The Jury believes that an interim EOC could be developed at minimal cost.

The OES Director has not analyzed how much space is actually required for an interim, dedicated EOC. Nor has he coordinated with the Fire and Sheriff Departments to determine what should be included in a new EOC.

There are several possible sites that have not been properly evaluated by the OES or the General Services Department.

Administration Building Basement

The basement of the Administration Building is made up of several areas: reprographics, IT, mailroom, OES, two conference rooms and storage space. Restrooms are available. The Administration Building was retrofitted in 1982 at a cost of \$264,000. While seismic standards and regulations have changed since then, the structural integrity of the Administration Building is superior to that of the current EOC.

In a recent memo² to the Board of Supervisors, the General Services Director stated:

Although an equivalent assessment of the basement of the Administration Building has not been performed, exploring this option further is not recommended for the following reasons:

- 1) This building is not an "essential services building" and would need to be retrofitted - and as a five-story building, would be prohibitively expensive.*
- 2) The space is not large enough unless the (information technology) IT equipment room and Reprographics function were relocated. Relocating Reprographics would be somewhat expensive and no alternative space is immediately identified; relocating the IT equipment room would be cost prohibitive and enormously disruptive.*
- 3) Locating a Joint Information Center (JIC) and holding press conferences in the basement of the Administration Building would be problematic for a variety of reasons.*

This memo was submitted when the basement was being considered as the permanent EOC, and was being compared to a new building north of Cathedral Oaks. The Jury does not believe that this evaluation would be the same if the basement were compared to the existing EOC.

The Jury determined that approximately 5,000 square feet could be made available (6,000 square feet if the mailroom were included). The reprographics and IT departments would not have to be moved. The available space is made up of two conference rooms, the OES offices and storage. This space clearly is inferior to a new building, but it exceeds the size of the existing EOC. The basement could be made into a dedicated interim EOC.

Alternative Locations

Other County-owned buildings would be inferior. The Veteran's Facility on Calle Real, for example, has sufficient space, but it has not been seismically retrofitted.

² Bob Nisbet, General Services Director to the Honorable Salud Carbajal, and Members, Board of Supervisors, December 9, 2008: "Supplemental Information: Discretionary Facility Projects Tentatively Approved for FY 2008-09"

It is worth noting that the San Luis Obispo EOC is located in a building owned by a public utility. In the private sector, there is significant vacant space located throughout the City of Santa Barbara and Goleta. It is likely much of that space meets seismic standards, and space would not be a problem.

Virtual EOC

Virtual EOC is a descriptive term for crisis information management systems that through the Internet provide secure real-time information sharing to help managers make sound decisions quickly. The need for such systems became apparent when on September 11, 2001 the New York City EOC was destroyed in the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers. Web-enabled information systems can be located anywhere, which allows for decentralized information management, coordination and provides instantaneous information to multiple users. These systems are generally used as a basic crisis information management system in conjunction with the operation of a physical EOC. When the EOC is not operable or key members of the EOC staff are not on site, such systems can function in much the same manner as if the EOC was in operation as long as Internet (or intranet) communications are operable. With the use of satellite internet systems with remote computer servers, such internet communication approaches are becoming increasingly reliable.

The geography of Santa Barbara County is such that it is likely that emergency personnel would be dispersed between the site of the emergency and the EOC. A virtual EOC could be a significant aid in the coordination of emergency services. One particular system, Web EOC from *ES7™*, is being used in San Luis Obispo County and is being purchased by Ventura County. The Jury understands the same system is being considered by the Santa Barbara County OES, at a cost of \$68,000. In other counties, this cost was paid for by Department of Homeland Security grants. Many emergencies could involve more than one county. It is the Jury's understanding that once the proper protocols are established this would allow information to be shared among all three counties, and not just be limited to Santa Barbara.

Training

Over a three-year period, the OES has conducted 23 training sessions, usually in conjunction with other agencies. Some of these training sessions have been tabletop exercises, and some have been held at local energy facilities, such as the Gaviota Oil Heating facility, Diablo Canyon and the Lompoc Oil and Gas Plant. Most of these training sessions have focused on energy-related emergencies, and others have dealt with health problems, such as a pandemic flu. Two training sessions were devoted to a tsunami and counterterrorism.

There are several notable omissions from the training programs. There has not been a training program associated with mud slides, which were considered to be the highest risk

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following the recent fires. Next to fires, the greatest threat to the County comes from a major earthquake. There has been no recent training in dealing with an earthquake.

CONCLUSION

The County of Santa Barbara has waited too long to set up a dedicated EOC. If a major earthquake were to hit the County, Santa Barbara would not have an EOC which could function. The only backup considered by the County appears to be tents, which do not meet FEMA guidelines. In an era of financial crisis, it may not be feasible to construct a new building. The design, approval and construction of a new building will take time. Inadequate efforts have been made to find alternative interim sites in existing buildings.

Above all, whatever is developed has to be developed soon. Further delays by the County continue to jeopardize the safety of its citizens.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The Santa Barbara County Emergency Operations Center is housed in temporary modular buildings which are unlikely to be usable following an earthquake.

Recommendation 1

That the Board of Supervisors investigate other sites to establish interim Emergency Operations Center. The sites considered must be measured against the existing Emergency Operations Center in terms of size and seismic safety.

Finding 2

The County Office of Emergency Services has not included the Fire or Sheriff's Departments as an integral part in planning for a new Emergency Operations Center.

Recommendation 2

That the Office of Emergency Services include staff from other departments, specifically the Fire and Sheriff's Departments, in planning the Emergency Operations Center.

Finding 3

The Austin Company recommended a permanent, dedicated Emergency Operations Center of 9,300 square feet. The existing Emergency Operations Center is approximately 3,670 square feet. Nowhere is it explained why two and a half times as much space is required.

Recommendation 3

That the Director of the Office of Emergency Services develop the space requirements for an interim Emergency Operations Center, recognizing that existing buildings might be less than 9,270 square feet.

Finding 4

The Ventura and San Luis Obispo County Emergency Operations Centers are dedicated and up and running. Santa Barbara County officials have not made a site visit to either of them.

Recommendation 4

That County officials schedule an appointment to conduct a site visit to evaluate the Ventura and San Luis Obispo Emergency Operations Centers.

Finding 5

The Office of Emergency Services Director is evaluating the purchase of Web EOC to allow Santa Barbara County to develop a Virtual EOC. The cost has been estimated at \$68,000.

Recommendation 5

That the Board of Supervisors authorize funds for the purchase of Web EOC software.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with *Section 933.05 of the California Penal Code*, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each:

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Finding 1, 5
Recommendation 1, 5

Santa Barbara County Executive Officer – 60 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services – 60 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Santa Barbara County Fire Department – 60 days

Finding 2
Recommendation 2

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department – 60 days

Finding 2
Recommendation 2

