

In Case of Emergency

By Federal Glover

People all over the country have been touched by the impact of the physical and human devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans. The cumulative loss of home, jobs, communities and family members are traumatic enough but the victims of the country's worst natural disaster don't even have the ability of returning home and face the daunting task of starting their lives all over again. Some have found their way to Contra Costa County.

I'm proud to see the people in Contra Costa response: Individuals offering homes to some of the evacuees; high school students collecting funds to send to the disaster area; St. Mary's College and UC Berkeley accepting some of the students of colleges that are now under water; local firefighters volunteering their time to help in the rescue and recovery efforts; East County churches sending truckloads of water, food and clothing; members of the National Guard MP unit in Pittsburg were activated and sent to help restore order; and hundreds of ordinary individuals collecting foodstuff, clothing and money to send to Katrina's victims. And the bond of family is proving to be strong as local residents take in relatives from the stricken area. Indeed, individual Americans reacted as we have done throughout our history -- with generosity and compassion.

Fortunately, Americans are taking rescue and relief efforts into their own hands. What made the calamity worse was the delay in delivering government aid to the victims. The rescue and recovery efforts of those government agencies that were supposed to be prepared for this sort of disaster, in President Bush's words, were "unacceptable."

That makes me think about our own plans in case a disaster strikes closer to home. We are faced with the prospect of extensive risk of death, injuries, property damage, and economic and social dislocation from both natural and man-made hazards and disasters. Specifically, our county faces risks from earthquakes, fires, landslides, floods, major levee failure in the Delta, and hazardous materials releases in addition to damage from terrorism.

What would happen if the Big One, an earthquake with the magnitude of the 1906 earthquake, were to hit the San Andreas fault or the Hayward fault, would we be prepared to render immediate and long-term aid to the hundreds of thousands of displaced people? Scientists say a big quake on the Hayward fault is not a question of "if," but "when." It would mean some hospitals built on and near the faultline would have to close down. Burst water pipes would make firefighting a near impossible task. As Katrina has shown, it is important that all our emergency personnel be able to communicate with each other when phone lines are down and cell phone towers topple.

Jones Tract's levees crumbled last year on a clear, calm day. That's an ominous warning on the conditions of our levees. If more of our levees fail, do we have the

pumps and boats in place to rescue operations and deliver aid? Like New Orleans, some islands and parts of East County are below sea level, should we be continuing to turn those farmlands into new suburbs?

If we had to evacuate East County for whatever reason, the scenario is frightening. Besides Highway 4, which is near impassable during commute hours already, what other escape routes exist? Would we be able to use the Bay ferries to evacuate? We should be making those plans now.

Along these lines, I am introducing an order, co-authored by Supervisor John Gioia, that all of our county departments determine what help we can offer to the recovery and relief of New Orleans and the rest of Gulf Coast. It may come in the form of medicine or medical personnel or sending a team of emergency rescue personnel from our group of first responders. It might also mean creating a temporary one-stop center where evacuees from the Gulf Coast can find help in finding long-term housing, jobs or directed to the agencies that give them financial, or assistance in paying rent or enrolling their children in local schools.

We are also asking that the county administrator find out how assistance provided by the county to victims of Hurricane Katrina can be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the state.

Contra Costa County should join other California counties to provide whatever appropriate assistance is needed to the victims of Hurricane Katrina *and* should also take the lead to insure that our communities are as prepared as much as possible for a major disaster and that the response to such a disaster is as quick and effective as possible.

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