

## Learning from Emergencies

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, February 2007

Curious residents drove over to get a first-hand view of the Foothill Fire last week in Westlake Village. Cars lined the streets with children's faces pressed up against the windows to get a good look. Despite it being dark, kids on bicycles cut across the slow moving traffic, and teenagers gathered together to check it all out. Concerned friends and families assisted worried residents who might have to evacuate. News vans and satellite trucks from local and network stations joined newspaper and radio reporters looking for someone to interview. And the unfortunate residents whose homes were threatened collected their animals, used garden hoses to water down dried vegetation, and tried to figure out what to pack in case of evacuation.

Two hundred firefighters took stands protecting threatened homes, maneuvering massive fire engines up winding roads clogged with parked cars and slow moving sight-seers that had converged on the scene. It made me wonder what would have happened if the winds had suddenly kicked up and people needed to evacuate and fire engines needed to move in quickly.

I know someone who took her dirty laundry when she evacuated from last year's Topanga Fire. Hanging out in a hotel with a basket of dirty laundry made her laugh. Monday's fire was a wake up call for those residents who didn't have a plan for what to pack in case of evacuation. They learned they didn't want to be in a situation where they have to decide such important things at the last minute.

Here are some helpful hints in case a fire is threatening your home: close your windows and doors to keep the smoke out of your house. Close your drapes and shutters; they can help reduce the interior heat. Point your car facing out in case you have to leave quickly because it may be hard to back out onto your street if it's filled with other cars. Have an animal carrier box available if you need one. There are many more tips on the Ventura County Fire website (<http://fire.countyofventura.org>) to learn how to protect yourself and your home if there is a fire.

The most important fire tip is to make sure the brush is cleared away from your home. If your home is next to open space, you need to clear brush 100 feet from structures. It not only helps keep a fire from reaching your house, it also provides a place for firefighters to defend your house. Also, it's important that landscape trees aren't planted too close to your house because burning embers spread easily in the winds of a fire, and branches overhanging a roof can act as a torch and ignite the building.

As individuals, and as agencies, we learn from emergencies how we can better respond to the next emergency. The only silver lining to the multiple emergency incidents we've faced in Ventura County in the last seven years (e.g., Alaska Airlines Flight 261, La Conchita Mudslide, the Topanga Fire, the Day Fire, the School Fire, the Shekell Fire, etc.) is that our first responders have become incredibly adept at what they do.

In addition to having well-trained personnel, there is also new technology that can assist us. We now have GPS systems in emergency vehicles that show their current location. This information is used by dispatchers and makes for faster response times and helps field personnel to better coordinate response. We're looking at new mapping technologies that can merge vulnerable population data on a map to locate people who need help. We are also looking at installing a Reverse 911 system that can give residents warning calls and provide information during critical emergencies.

We have great resources for emergency response in Ventura County. As everyday citizens, we also need to be prepared and knowledgeable so that we can best respond in emergencies: from knowing what we can do if a fire threatens our house, keeping supplies on hand in case of a major earthquake, taking first aid courses so we can help others, to acting responsibly to ensure our actions don't hinder emergency efforts. Well-trained personnel, effective technology, and helpful citizens can make all the difference in the outcome of an emergency; and when it means the difference between life and death, what can be more important?