

GUEST EDITORIAL *by Bob Hazard*

Mr. Hazard is an associate editor of this paper and a former president of Birnam Wood Golf Club.



Rebuilding Montecito: A Focus on Partnership Solutions

The Thomas Wildfire and the January 9 debris flow have presented the county with the most complex disaster recovery and preparedness scenarios in California history. The confluence of events leading to the twin disasters was unprecedented, the threat of a repeat disaster is still imminent, acceptable mitigation solutions are still amorphous, and their costs uncertain.

Disaster Relief Team

I wish every resident of Montecito had an opportunity to tour the County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and Emergency Operations Center (EOC) headquarters at 4408 Cathedral Oaks Road. We are fortunate to have such a talented and professional county disaster recovery team, with a rare mix of strategic planning, professional engineering, fire fighting, flood control, and disaster recovery skills.

Team members include assistant county executive officer **Matt Pontes**, who is leading the Montecito recovery efforts; **Terri Maus-Nisich**, assistant county executive officer; **Rob Lewin**, OEM director and retired SLO County CAL-Fire chief; **Dianne Black**, director, County Planning and Development and her 90 case workers and employees; **Tom Fayram**, deputy director of Water Resources and Flood Control; **Scott McGolpin**, director County Public Works; and **Ben Romo**, community recovery and engagement coordinator for the Montecito Center for Preparedness, Recovery and Rebuilding at 1283 Coast Village Circle.

These team members are competent are both professional and dedicated, but like so many resources in County government they are cash-strapped and have been penalized by unsustainable public pension commitments and lifetime retiree healthcare benefits.

Current Funding

The County expects to incur more than \$55 million to replace and repair infrastructure, including \$21 million for rebuilding roads, bridges, and culverts. All but \$12.3 million is potentially recoverable. The County Board of Supervisors (BOS) voted to use \$6.25 million from its strategic reserve fund to help cover costs until reimburse-

ments are received.

In addition, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a federal agency under the Department of Defense with 37,000 civilian and military engineering and administrative personnel, expended some \$100 million to clear and restore Montecito creek channels, clean debris basins, and haul away mud and debris from public property following the January 9 debris flow.

Public Sector Efforts

The county recovery team has been tasked with developing recommendations to present to the County BOS on six specific issues:

- 1) *An updated storm readiness and evacuation plan for 2018-19, based on new risk data;*
 - 2) *Long-term flood mitigation solutions, including an improved debris basin management network, creek channel maintenance, waterway conveyance systems, steel structures that capture large boulders and debris, alternative debris disposal sites, and the potential purchase of property to include flood control zones;*
 - 3) *Private property re-building guidelines for homeowners, consistent with the concern of protecting the community from future debris flows;*
 - 4) *Debris removal on private property through the development of a debris removal management plan;*
 - 5) *Financial impacts and economic recovery plans to secure funding for critical hazard mitigation and facilitate a long-term economic recovery and resiliency plan for the Montecito community;*
 - 6) *Infrastructure improvements, such as working with the community, utilities, and science and technology experts to underground utilities; re-open bridges; improve traffic flows by restoring and maintaining local roads; and consideration of new parklands with new hiking, biking, and equestrian trails that might benefit the community.*
- When these solutions are presented to the BOS, County staff will have had more direct influence in shaping the rebuilding of Montecito over the next five years than any of Montecito's local residents. Realistic planning starts with dreams, but quickly evolves into what is prudent and possible, and identification of how possible solutions can be funded in Santa Barbara County. The range and costs of possible solutions cry out for effective public-private partnerships between the community of Montecito and disaster relief personnel in Santa Barbara County.

Private-Public Partnership

The Partnership for Resilient Communities is a local, non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable corporation focusing on safety and resiliency efforts for communities below the Thomas Fire, Whittier Fire, and Sherpa Fire burn scar. Within days after the January 9 event, it was formed spontaneously. In a memorandum of understanding, approved by the County BOS on May 1, four goals were set forth in the partnership efforts to work with the county:

- 1) Determine feasible mitigation efforts to reduce the impact of future debris flows within Santa Barbara County;
- 2) Engage national and international experts experienced in disaster mitigation and recovery to work in concert with Santa Barbara County, its special districts, its school districts, its citizens, and federal and state agencies that rebuild communities to make them safer than before;
- 3) Assist local county government in identifying, attracting, and receiving public funding and private sector resources;
- 4) Provide solutions and lessons learned here to other communities that may suffer similar disasters.

The Partners

Leaders include **Brett Matthews**, Montecito entrepreneur schooled in public-private partnerships; **Joe Cole**, attorney and chair of the Montecito Planning Commission; **Pat McElroy**, former Santa Barbara Fire chief; **Gwyn Lurie**, chair of the Montecito Union School Board of Trustees; **Les Firestein**, screenwriter and producer; **Mary Rose**, political and public policy consultant; and a host of other backers and financial supporters.

On May 1, the County BOS accepted a donation of \$140,000 from the Montecito-based Partners for Resilient Communities to allow the county to hire **David Fukutomi** in a consulting role as chief recovery advisor to the county, reporting directly to assistant county executive officer **Matt Pontes**.

Fukutomi is a national expert in disaster response and recovery. His past efforts include stints with both FEMA and the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). In his last assignment with FEMA, Fukutomi served as special assistant to former U.S. Coast Guard commandant, admiral Thad Allen, the principal federal officer for the response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. He brings to the County a unique perspective from his combination of field operations and senior planning and funding experience.

Said Pontes: "We don't have expertise in large disaster

recovery. David Fukutomi can be of great assistance in leveraging our limited local dollars with state and federal grants. We welcome David as a member of our recovery team. He understands what we are up against, and because he is connected and respected in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., he can provide ideas and sources of grant funding that we historically haven't used. Rebuilding and recovery are complex; it will take everyone working together – the Montecito community, the County recovery team, the state, the feds, the scientific community, and private businesses."

Additional Partnership

Fukutomi is working with other consultants including **James Lee Witt**, former head of FEMA, and former U.S. Coast Guard admiral **Thad Allen**, who served as national incident commander for the Deepwater Horizon Gulf Coast oil spill.

The Partnership for Resilient Communities has also consulted with Stockton, California-based Kane Geo-Tech Inc, headed by Dr. **William F. Kane**, a former geoenvironmental professor, with 23 years' experience in geohazards such as rock mechanics, rockfall mitigation, debris flows, slope stability, and avalanche protection. Possible geo-engineering solutions include geohazard instrumentation, computer modeling, and the implementation of strategically placed high-tension ring nets to catch debris.

Additional future partners could include such companies as Terrain Works in Mount Shasta, California, and American Geotechnical in Yorba Linda.

What Happens Next

It is imperative that the County, special districts, the Partnership for Resilient Communities, and other organized regional Montecito planning and zoning groups partner together, particularly over the six remaining months before the next rainy season, in a collaborative effort to identify life and property safety mitigation measures that are financially feasible and provide community protection to the greatest extent possible. If there are better ways for dealing with local disaster threats, we must find them. With a team such as I've just described, I believe Montecito will find those ways.

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