



NEWS



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- MAC meeting addresses lessons learned from storm

MAC meeting addresses lessons learned from storm

By Brandon Holloman, Mountain News

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After being cancelled two months in a row due to the impact of the snowstorms, both the Lake Arrowhead and Crest Forest Municipal Advisory Councils (MACs) hosted a joint meeting for the month of May on the third.

Attending the meeting was District Supervisor Dawn Rowe, as well as many other leaders of governmental agencies to provide reports on the response to March's storm.

Supervisor Rowe was the first speaker of the night. She began by admitting that it wasn't ideal for her to have begun her duties as supervisor for the district encompassing the mountains in January, only two months before the emergency struck. She called it a "trial by fire," but also noted that "it was sort of a blessing for me to be able to get to know your communities, the difference between them, the resources in the communities and what you don't have and how we at the county can help supplement that."

"Through this entire endeavor, I have learned that the mountain communities are extremely resilient," she remarked.

Rowe went on to explain what the county has been and is doing to help those affected by the storm. Of note, she stated that in the future she will advocate for utility companies to have their own snow removal equipment so that their jobs may be performed without the aid of outside agencies.

At the urging of the supervisor, the Land Use Services Department has waved all permit fees up to \$5,000 for red and yellow-tagged businesses of the mountain. In addition, there is a special team created with Land Use Services, solely for the purpose of focusing on the mountain area to expedite the issues of permits.

Rowe also assembled meetings of community leaders reaching as wide a demographic as possible from the mountain areas and used feedback from them to help construct a new emergency plan. Topics focused on include road maintenance and snow removal, restoration of utilities, public safety and emergency services, operations regarding schools, access to food, medicine and emergency medical services for vulnerable populations and communications with impacted residents and businesses. The feedback gathered has been compiled into a report that has been made available on Supervisor Rowe's website. Additional feedback from the public is welcomed.

Supervisor Rowe ended her segment highlighting the new heavy equipment the county is looking into

acquiring for future snowstorms. Her submitted request to public works includes nine loaders, 10 cat nine thirties, 12 skid steers and snowblowers.

After Rowe, San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus was the first agency leader to speak. Sheriff Dicus began to express that throughout the entire storm, not a single deputy missed a shift, even if it required sleeping in the station's bunk house. The deputies were augmented by the department's mobile field force, who are mobilized to respond to emergencies.

Sheriff Dicus also expressed the difficulty the Sheriff's Department had with the media during the storm. Many media outlets focused on the death counts during the storm and framed it as a mass-casualty event. While it was true that bodies were recovered during sheriff wellness checks, which could have been directly caused by the storm, no official cause of death could be issued at the time, until the coroner could make a report. The only storm-related death during the storm was from a car accident in Big Bear. Other deaths were of other causes such as illness or drugs, which would have led to a death with or without the storm.

"It's hard to understand, because when we live our day-to-day lives, we don't know how many people die on a daily basis just as a result of being human," Dicus said.

There was no mass-casualty event, the deaths were expected, but several media outlets spun it to make a news story and sensationalized it in the process.

Next to speak was **San Bernardino County Fire** Chief Dan Munsey. Chief Munsey focused on the coordination of the different agencies during the storm. A central command station was set up, where the fire department, sheriff department, CHP, Caltrans, utility companies and more communicated and coordinated on the issues as they arose.

Then was Brendon Biggs, Director of San Bernardino County Public Works, the department in charge of plowing and snow removal. He noted how the regular plows used are only good up to 18 inches of snow, and how quickly loaders were needed instead of plows. Loaders were promptly requested from the state.

There was an unfortunate bottleneck in contracting equipment. "As you know, Southern California doesn't get snow except up here. Back east, where you have the whole state under snow, every contractor's ready to help. Here, we have tons of contractors in the valley, but they don't have chains, don't have the right buckets, they don't do snow." Instead, all that is available is the limited contractors in the mountain, who are also being contracted privately, making it difficult to get the right equipment.

In order to get the necessary equipment, Public Works contacted chain vendors in the east to make an emergency purchase of whatever they had, then searched for vendors that had the right size tires to fit the chains that were available.

San Bernardino County Land Use Services, Caltrans and CHP spoke briefly as well. All shared a similar sentiment of learning from their own mistakes and inabilities during the storm and needing to have better plan of action should such an emergency strike again.

After the speakers, the floor was opened to questions from the community. These questions tended to focus on future planning, addressing mistakes and facilitating the processes. These questions, concerns, and advice were considered by the leaders present at the meeting.

In response to a question asked, Caltrans noted that potholes across mountain roads are worse than normal

currently, due to the excess water from the storm. They have not been repaired yet, as asphalt repair must be conducted in warmer weather. Emily Leinen, Caltrans Manager of External Affairs, requested that mountain residents be patient once the repairs begin, “especially when we start closing your lanes, because that is going to happen.”

No one was truly prepared for the storm, but given its scope, no one truly could be. It was a learning experience for all involved. And now that it’s firmly behind us, the government agencies that are designed to help us through such states of emergencies will be better equipped and more prepared to do what they need to do.

The next Lake Arrowhead MAC meeting will be held Thursday, June 1 at 6 pm as the San Bernardino County Building in Twin Peaks, while the next Crest Forest MAC meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, June 6, at 6:30 pm, at the San Moritz Lodge.

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