IN THE PREDAWN HOURS of Monday, January 5, 2015, a ringing and buzzing phone roused Hoquiam Police Chief Jeff Myers from a fitful sleep.

“All hell broke loose,” recalls Myers. “We started getting 911 calls that houses were getting knocked off their foundations and people were screaming for help.”

Nearly a foot of rain had fallen in 24 hours, a deluge of biblical proportions. In Beacon Hill, a neighborhood of 100 homes on the east side of town, all that rain saturated topsoil and percolated down to bedrock, where it flowed like a subterranean river, undercutting the hillside. At 5:30 that morning, Beacon Hill slid, destroying six homes, severing a water main and sewer lines, and burying the only road into and out of the neighborhood under tons of mud. It was the worst of a half-dozen slides reported all around town—and nobody saw the disaster coming.

“We’ve had flooding before, but this was by far the worst,” says City

continued on page 10 →
In Neighbors We Trust

Bellevue takes emergency management to the people.

Last year’s Oso mudslide killed 43 people and covered a rural town in muck that, in some places, was up to 80 feet deep. Emergency workers and citizen volunteers from around the region were dispatched to help, including Sophia Le of the Bellevue Office of Emergency Management (OEM).

“That experience changed my perspective on how I do my job, especially in outreach and education,” Le recalls. “When I saw volunteers washing mud off mementos to return to the victims, it really made me understand the value that volunteers can bring to an incident.”

Since 1993, when FEMA established the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program to train citizen volunteers in disaster-preparedness skills, CERTs have responded to everything from floods to missing-persons searches to pandemics. Even with the success of this national program, disaster planning is shaped by local culture and the specific needs of a city. Bellevue’s OEM has distinguished itself through unique efforts to combine social media, diversity awareness, and data-driven disaster response. If that fact clashes with the city’s reputation as a stuffy, wealthy enclave, that’s only because the reputation hasn’t kept up with shifting demographics.

Recognizing that 37 percent of Bellevue residents speak a language other than English at home, the city in 2013 created a pictogram campaign to present information on hazard preparedness in a visual format accessible to all. The OEM’s mission of reaching everyone has also prompted Le’s office to maintain a dedicated Facebook page and Twitter channel and to create videos for the city’s YouTube channel.

“A lot of cities experiment with alerts and warnings,” notes Le, “but we try to make it so that citizens have a way to get info from us without feeling overwhelmed.” Projects like the office’s award-winning music video “Ways to Survive,” which features an animated Sasquatch family navigating common Pacific Northwest disasters, often make getting info from the OEM entertaining.

Some of Bellevue’s emergency preparedness strategies even flip the customary flow of aid on its head. Thanks to a citizen corps of ham-radio enthusiasts, Eastside Amateur Radio Support (EARS), emergency-response workers without phone or Internet service can depend on some 50 volunteer radio operators to connect them to the city’s Emergency Operations Center.

It all stems from a conviction that true emergency preparedness involves more than just emergency workers helping citizens. Rather, it calls for a broad, cooperative effort: neighbors helping neighbors, citizens helping emergency workers, and everyone pitching in where they can. Even on the statewide and national scales, collaboration and teamwork are vital.

Le learned a lot from her experience in Oso last year, but learning from others isn’t a one-time thing. “All of the neighboring cities have taught me a great deal about CERT and volunteer management,” she emphasizes. “A lot of jurisdictions are doing amazing things.”

—Rene Bermudez
Fire by Twilight

Forks raises a brand-new arts building from the ashes.

An early-morning fire raged through downtown Forks in late October 2012 and destroyed half a block, including a community arts venue whose destruction left an “open wound right in the middle of downtown,” says the city’s attorney/planner, Rod Fleck. “When you have community structures lost in a fire like that, there’s a mourning period for the people associated with that building.”

Cut to the present, and Forks is entering the final stages of construction on the Rainforest Arts Center (RAC), a multimillion-dollar facility that will play a vital role in the tourism industry upon which the city’s economy largely depends. The renovation was funded almost entirely by insurance money, in a complicated process that involved juggling the demands of insurance underwriters, the city, and Forks citizens who felt the loss of a community hub.

The city asked architecture graduate students from the University of Washington to create potential designs for the new building to show to Forks residents, whose reactions were recorded. Before the city council made final design decisions, they reviewed the student designs, the community’s responses, and the city’s pragmatic needs for the building. There was ample information to consider, but also a stopwatch that was running out: “In a situation like this, the clock is ticking with insurance underwriters,” Fleck explains. “If a government has a loss similar to this, they need to understand the insurance timeline early. The public will want to spend ages on this, but you just can’t do that.”

The construction process has been marked by obstacles like the discovery of underground fuel tanks from the 1940s and prolonged design reviews, as members of the public debated between architecture “that paid homage to the old building and designs that were totally different and future-forward,” Fleck says. Yet close collaboration with insurance representatives has kept the project on track for the planned opening ceremony in the spring.

Once completed, the RAC will be home to the temporarily displaced Rainforest Players and will host arts events both public and private. “It’ll provide a chance for the community to get together,” says Lissy Andros, executive director of the Forks Chamber of Commerce. “From a tourism standpoint, one of the things that the Chamber of Commerce is really looking forward to is the 10-year anniversary of the first book of the Twilight series in September. The RAC will have events and parties; it’ll be a hub of activity.”

The RAC will be formally opened on April 19, 2015, two and a half years after the fire burned the Rainforest Players’ former venue to the ground. “The emotional importance of the old building was significant,” Fleck says, “and I think the new RAC will have a long enjoyment.” —Larisa Owechko

For more information: forkswashington.org
In order to provide for the continuity and preservation of civil government, each elected and appointed officer or the state shall designate those public documents which are essential records of his or her office and needed in an emergency and for the reestablishment of normal operations after any such emergency. A list of such records shall be forwarded to the state archivist on forms prescribed by the state archivist. This list shall be reviewed at least annually by the elected or appointed officer to insure its completeness. Any changes or revisions following this review shall be forwarded to the state archivist. Each such elected and appointed officer of state government shall insure that the security of essential records of his or her office is by the most economical means commensurate with adequate protection. Protection of essential records may be by vaulting, planned or natural dispersal of copies, or any other method approved by the state archivist. Reproductions of essential records may be by photo copy, magnetic tape, microfilm, or other method approved by the state archivist. Local government offices may coordinate the protection of their essential records with the state archivist as necessary to provide continuity of local government under emergency conditions.

The state archivist is authorized to reproduce those documents designated as essential records by the several elected and appointed officials of the state and local government by microfilm or other miniature photographic process and to assist and cooperate in the storage and safeguarding of such reproductions in such place as is recommended by the state archivist with the advice of the *director of community, trade, and economic development. The state archivist shall coordinate the essential records protection program and shall carry out the provisions of the state emergency plan as they relate to the preservation of essential records. The state archivist is authorized to charge the several departments of the state and local government the actual cost incurred in reproducing, storing and safeguarding such documents: PROVIDED, That nothing herein shall authorize the destruction of the originals of such documents after reproduction thereof.
The Question

Your community went through a disaster. What did you wish you had known before the emergency?

LONDI LINDELL
City Administrator, North Bend

How to immediately post information on the city’s Facebook page and Twitter account. An explosion woke most of the town at 3:30 a.m., but our first press release was issued at 8 a.m. We were too slow informing people about road closures and reporting the good news that the fire was contained. We have since decentralized this function so that more than one city employee can release information rapidly through social media.

BETTY GARRISON
Finance Director, Milton

I was Roy’s clerk when city hall burned down, and I wish we had had an inventory of our city hall contents. Trying to put that list together while going through the burned-out building was so hard. In the process, we discovered how valuable Sheetrock is: all of Roy’s handwritten, leather-bound records dating back to 1908 only survived because they were protected by two layers of Sheetrock.

JOAN CROMLEY
Mayor, Hamilton

Fortunately, the river flooding was minor compared to some events in our history. I learned a lot more about our local hydrology, and thankfully Hamilton’s employees and fire department know how to manage these situations effectively. I wish I had known how to better manage my stress! Listening to water boiling through culverts in the reverse direction, in the dark, is scary.

TRAINING HIGHLIGHTS

CITY ACTION DAYS
February 18-19  Olympia
City Action Days brings together more than 300 elected city officials to dive deep into municipal legislative priorities and bring those discussions to legislators. This year, the conference includes a new twist—city and county officials are joining together to move the local government message forward. It’s part of the larger mission of the Local Government Champions Caucus, a growing group of bipartisan legislators who are working on common-ground solutions to help communities get back on their fiscal feet. Caucus members will bring their message to conference attendees.

HEALTH CARE REGIONAL FORUMS
February 3-11, March 18-19
A series of forums for AWC Benefit Trust members only, educating them on existing health care plans and rating structures. The conversation is critical as cities move toward the 2018 adoption of new excise taxes under the Affordable Care Act. The forum discussion gives AWC vital input as discussions move forward on evaluating AWC’s existing and potentially new plans. The forums are the cities’ chance to have their voices heard.

TRAININGS

FEBRUARY
Health Care Regional Forums
3  Kennewick
4  Spokane
10  Mount Vernon
11  Olympia
RMSA Land Use Processes & Pitfalls
17  DuPont
City Action Days
18-19  Olympia
Something for Everyone:
99+ Wellness Activities
19  webinar
Retro Safety Academy
26-27  Bremerton

MARCH
Health Care Regional Forums
18  Olympia
19  Lynnwood
Slide Rules continued from page 5

Administrator Brian Shay. “The highway from Hoquiam to Aberdeen was under three feet of water. . . . The only thing that saved us was that it stopped raining.”

That, and having planned ahead.

In the aftermath of a hurricane-force windstorm in 2007, the city had purchased a 26-foot-long cargo truck and converted it into a mobile command post equipped with computers, communications gear, lights, and a generator. Soon after the Beacon Hill slide, the truck was dispatched to a nearby McDonalds parking lot as a base for managing the city’s response to the disaster: police officers and firefighters rescued stranded homeowners and motorists and evacuated residents; excavators removed 40,000 cubic yards of debris; utility workers shut off broken water and sewer lines and rerouted service. By Saturday, five days after the slide, Hoquiam had transitioned from emergency response to recovery with a citywide cleanup that drew 300 volunteers.

“Small communities rally with boots on the ground: it’s neighbors and friends, not government,” Myers says. “The city had a hand in it, but it’s volunteers that make the difference.”

Still, the city faces a heavy burden. Most local homeowners didn’t carry flood or slide insurance, so many of those affected by the storm may walk away from their homes as others did following Harbor Paper’s mill closure in February 2013, when 240 workers lost family-wage jobs and Hoquiam lost $500,000 in annual tax revenue. Since then, to balance its budget, the city has cut 7 of 84 positions from its payroll. And that fiscal hit, Shay notes, came on top of the elimination of the state’s motor vehicle excise tax in 1995, which had resulted in a prior staff reduction of 20 percent from 104 employees.

All told, infrastructure repairs from the storm of 2015 will cost the city in excess of $1.8 million, an amount larger than Hoquiam’s fire and parks budgets combined. And because the statewide toll of public storm damage didn’t total at least $9.4 million, the minimum threshold for FEMA disaster relief funding, the city and others like it will be required to foot the entire repair bill on their own. (The one exception is federally classified roads, which did reach the minimum damage threshold—luckily for Hoquiam, Beacon Hill has some federally classified roadway, so the city will recoup some expense.)

“Every city needs to plan for how it would recover from a disaster, especially if financially you don’t have the resources,” Shay says. “But Hoquiam is resilient. We will survive and push forward. . . . We need to, and will, take care of ourselves.” —Ted Katauskas