

Oracle Holds Its First Evacuation Meeting by Holt Bodinson / Oracle Firewise

EVACUATE! It's a scary thought, but Oracle residents are being urged to prepare for the unthinkable.

Most residents remember with dread the devastating forest fires that swept up to the edges of Oracle's residential districts—the Oracle Hill and Bullock Fires of 2002, the Aspen Fire of 2003 and the John Adams Fire of 2014. Since then the community has done a remarkable job of evaluating residential properties for fire risk through its Firewise volunteer corps, maintaining a year-round brush dump and working with the U.S. Forest Service and the Arizona State Forestry Division to reduce forest fuels in and around the periphery of Oracle.

Yet, as last summer's heavy build-up of wild grasses proved, keeping potential wildfire fuels under control is a constant and a personal responsibility of every homeowner.

The question remains as to what would happen if the residents had to evacuate. At a packed meeting at the Oracle Community Center, residents heard from the key local and state agencies which would be responsible for the controlled evacuation and recovery of the community.

Fire Chief Larry Southard and Assistant Chief Robert Jennings explained that the Fire Department itself does not conduct evacuations since its personnel would be fighting the fire but relies on the immediate formation of a multi-agency task force under a unified command consisting of the Pinal County Sheriff's Department, Pinal County Office of Emergency Management, Arizona Department of Public Safety and the American Red Cross.

The Chiefs observed that Oracle Fire Department with the help of CERTS and Firewise volunteers has developed an Emergency Notification Telephone System that contains the land line numbers of Oracle residents and can be expanded to include cell phone numbers if residents would volunteer them. Oracle has been divided into 19 sections, and the Emergency Notification System will be activated to deliver a pre-evacuation notice to any or all of the sections threatened. The Chiefs also explained that volunteers have been meeting face-to-face with Oracle's most vulnerable residents, those with Home Alone units, to insure they know how to prepare for evacuation and know who would be responsible for their evacuation.

Pinal County Sheriff Paul Babeu then explained to the audience that his department would be the lead agency in control of the evacuation and the establishment of a unified Incident Command. He observed that each deputy has a detailed map of Oracle in their vehicle computer arranged into evacuation sectors, and his deputies would use both loud speakers and house-to-house checks to insure residents were evacuating. Sheriff Babeu also noted that he would be working in conjunction with DPS to maintain traffic control of residents leaving and of fire fighting assets coming into the community. In closing, he noted that once the community or portions of the community had been evacuated, his deputies would be responsible for securing the area to prevent criminal activity of any kind.

Sergeant Vern Havens of the AZ Department of Public Safety noted that his personnel would be working on road closures and helping to direct evacuees to possible safe evacuation facilities.

He added that DPS also had helicopters that could be used to air evacuate residents who might get trapped in the fire while also being able to assist ongoing firefighting efforts. In closing, Sergeant Havens reminded the audience that it was not only fires that might force an evacuation

but also a major hazardous materials (Hazmat) incident on the highway. Should a Hazmat accident occur, his department would be working closely with Pinal County Public Works, Office of Emergency Management and ADOT to contain the incident and recover the site.

Art Carlton, representing the Pinal County Office of Emergency Management, explained that his agency was the equivalent of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on a county level. In the case of a forest fire, their role was to coordinate and furnish supplies and equipment to responding personnel and be responsible for restoring essential community and public services following the incident. He noted that the county had received a grant to set-up a county-wide mass notification system similar to Oracle's, but it was not yet in service. On an interesting note, he observed that the office was working on pet evacuation plans and assets in case of a large emergency.

Austin Creswell, representing the Red Cross, reinforced Art Carlton comments, by explaining that Red Cross personnel support the role of the Office of Emergency Management and free up emergency responders by erecting shelters and attending to the needs of the evacuees.

The next speaker was **Mary Harris, Co-Chair of Oracle Firewise**, who again urged residents to eliminate fire fuels from around their residences, apply for Oracle's grant funded, brush thinning program, volunteer for Firewise or CERTS and by all means review the invaluable materials posted on the Oracle Fire Department's website: www.oraclefire.org.

The final speaker was **State Representative TJ Shope**, who complemented the cooperating agencies for their planning and incident preparation in the face of major emergencies and especially complemented Oracle for its outstanding organization and level of community preparedness.

“EVACUATE” seemed just a little less scary as the community learned of the level of incident planning and preparedness already put in place by multiple local and state agencies.