

Minutes of the Palomar Mountain Planning Organization Meeting November 3, 2007

Board Members Present:

Robert Carlyle, Donna Dose, Elizabeth Getzoff (alternate), Bruce Graves, Jim Hamerly, Rob Hawk, Scott Kardel, Bonnie Phelps, Michael Pique, Alan Serry, Earl Walls.

Board Members Absent: Thomas Burton, Susan Humason, Jerry Johnson, Bob O'Neill.

The PMPO Board Meeting was convened at 10:08 AM November 3, 2007, at the Palomar Mountain Volunteer Fire Department. The Secretary's and Treasurer's reports were deferred to the next meeting.

New Business: Responses to October Poomacha Fire:

Jim Hamerly said the PMPO's action in response to immediate needs included placing dumpsters at the Mile 10.8 overlook and at Baileys. These will be removed after next week; we will try to get reimbursement from FEMA for our costs.

Earl Walls complained that the activities of the Red Cross and FEMA at the Borrego Springs evacuation center were anything but satisfactory. Scott Kardel complained that after the Julian and Ramona evacuations ended on Saturday October 27 the center closed up, ignoring the Palomar evacuees, most of whom moved (or had already moved) to the Palm Canyon Resort. A source of difficulty was that Palomar was still closed to residents even in locations without specific damage, which did not fit in with the categories of assistance that the Red Cross mechanisms could handle. The PMPO board asked Earl Walls to draft a letter to the Red Cross and the incident commander describing the confusion exhibited. The PMPO board approved sending thank-you letters to the Palm Canyon Resort, the town of Borrego Springs, the Borrego Springs Red Cross and shelter manager Robert Morris, the PMVFD and Chief George Lucia, and the fire department of New York.

Earl pointed out that some Palomar residents out of work because of the fire and evacuation were helped by a small fund privately donated and administered by the PMVFD, so they could buy gasoline, food, and lodging.

Rob Hawk said erosion control was a high priority, especially for the South Grade. Bruce Graves said sandbags are available free of charge at the helicopter pad and George Lucia is working on getting them filled with sand and ready to use. Bonnie Phelps said good straw to put over burned areas is Bergman's alfalfa straw. Jim Hamerly said many volunteer teams are available from downhill to help.

George Lucia said the US Forest Service and CAL FIRE will prepare an extensive chronological report on the fire and responses. Please write down shortcomings you observed and submit them through the PMVFD or CAL FIRE.

Alan Serry noted the telephone message line his wife Diana set up during the fire worked well. Callers heard an update on the situation then could leave messages with questions or information. Alan and Diana checked these messages often and responded as they could.

Alan asked if the PMPO should do a Palomar resident phone book, which people could agree to be listed in. Bonnie Phelps has such a list for her own personal and business use and has shared it with the fire department, Alan Serry, and the PMPO only. Robert Carlyle said he tried 7 years ago to publish such a directory, sending out 265 postcards but receiving back only 11 "yes" cards. Earl Walls suggested putting out a request for volunteers to make calls to verify phone numbers and receive "opt-in" permissions.

It was noted that the microwave repeater stations were not doing enough to clear brush from their properties and asked the issue be put on the next PMPO meeting agenda. Jim Hamerly and Robert Carlyle will write Supervisor Horn asking for prompt enforcement of the 100-foot brush clearing rules.

The Board approved Rob Hawk's motion to ask the county for more stringent enforcement of existing laws regarding clearing of downed limbs, dead ferns, dry brush, dead & dying trees, to be co-signed by the PMVFD, CERT, and the Observatory.

Elizabeth Getzoff led a discussion of what did not go right during the fire, including people being turned away from the Observatory area of safe refuge, the reverse 911 giving no information as to where to go or how to get there, and CERT advice being unclear and unhelpful.

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On the Observatory lock-out, Bruce Graves said the PMVFD decided about 4 AM to send residents to the Observatory and stationed a volunteer in the intersection to direct evacuees there; however, the Observatory refused admittance. People returned to the fire station and reported this, which added to confusion over where to go and what roads were safe.

Elizabeth Getzoff asked how people in areas without telephone service were notified to evacuate, such as along the South and East Grade roads, and Cliff Kellogg said they were not notified, as far as he knew.

Bonnie Phelps noted there had been much friction between out-of-town law enforcement officers and residents who had permission to be on the mountain to tend livestock, or had simply stayed at their homes. Robert Carlyle said restricting access to public roads was necessary to prevent looting, as he said occurred in Ramona within 3 hours of the evacuation, and as he observed at Bailey's.

Elizabeth Getzoff said she and co-owners lost houses on both the South Grade and East Grade roads, despite having complied with defensible space guidelines. An eyewitness told her that the South Grade house burned late Tuesday afternoon about two hours after a grass fire reached it, with no defensive effort by PMVFD or CAL FIRE. Cliff Kellogg said CAL FIRE was blocked from below, at milepost 43.8, and the PMVFD and the USFS were up on top of the South Grade, parked at Mother's Kitchen, and could not go down; that from what they saw, they would have killed a crew and lost the engine. Robert Carlyle said Tuesday afternoon's South Grade fire was a dangerous and capricious fire driven by strong winds. Rob Hawk said the incident commander has to make quick blanket decisions on what to protect and what to abandon.

Elizabeth Getzoff said her East Grade house was burned during Wednesday evening's back-firing operation, with no one even going down the driveway to it to attempt any protection. It was all well and good, she said, that there were 30 large fire engines from Los Angeles here on Palomar Mountain, but she asked why not one engine went down the driveway to protect the East Grade house during the back-firing. Reportedly, the back-firing was done by out-of-area crews who did not know where houses were or which ones still had people in them. She said that George Ravenscroft, on the East Grade, told her no one from the PMVFD checked up on him or his house during the fire or the back-firing operations. Cliff Kellogg said that because this became a "federal fire" the back-firing was controlled by CAL FIRE, not locals familiar with the area. CAL FIRE and the PMVFD did not have the same radios, for example. Moreover, the maps issued to the crews were not detailed or up-to-date and were poorly reproduced.

To help in future emergencies, the PMPO will prepare a map of all houses on the mountain and pass the map to the PMVFD. Earl Walls also suggests the PMPO put water tanks, pumps, and hoses around the mountain, capable of putting an inch and a half stream of water over the tallest trees on the properties.

The Board commended Bonnie Phelps for her sincere efforts to communicate news and concerns among the Palomar Mountain community.

Legal Access to Land Parcels:

Bonnie Phelps says that the task now needs someone to do the legwork on deeds and signatures. Some property owners are still objecting to the project, and there is a continuing problem with money. The road from Birch Hill up to the former Ackerman property is finished and next will be the road west of the Lodge. Instead of only escrow and title and recording, may have to hire an attorney for the next stage, and will need between \$570 and \$1300 per parcel plus whatever the attorney costs are.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:06 PM.

Michael Pique