



Transcript
Firewise Communities Chat Session
August 8, 2007

judithleraascook Welcome to today's chat session. The purpose of the hour is for us to share information about wildfire evacuation and creating wildfire evacuation plans. My name is Judith Leraas Cook, and I am the project manager for Firewise Communities/USA. Michele Steinberg, support manager for the Firewise program, and I will moderate the presentation. Welcome, Michele!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks, Judith. I am looking forward to today's chat.

judithleraascook Today our speaker is Tim Steele, President of Mission Canyon Association in Santa Barbara County, California. Tim is very engaged in wildfire issues as they affect Mission Canyon. (In fact, I understand that he is currently evacuated from his house.) He is a practicing architect professionally, and we are delighted he has taken the time to be with us today. Please hold your questions until the end of Tim's presentation. When he has finished, the chat will become completely interactive. We encourage you to join in at that time. Tim, would you tell our participants about Mission Canyon and why your homeowners association decided that creating a wildfire evacuation plan was in its best interest?

tmsteele Thank you Judith. Our neighborhood of 1200 people is situated in a box canyon at 800 elevation amongst mountains that rise to 3000 feet. We knew the fuel load was exceptionally heavy and had not burnt in 90 years. When the County Fire department developed a computer model showing the fire behavior of our canyon during a weather condition similar to a previous fire forty years ago, the model showed the fire running straight into the flat urban area of town below us fire create inversions here with the mountains so close by. Neighbors asked, "How long would it take our neighborhood to evacuate?" The model had shown us that the fire could rush into our area in a matter of twenty minutes. Fortunately, we have an advanced Geography department at UCSB nearby, many professors live in our area. They developed a computer traffic model showing actual auto behavior. The model illustrated with our narrow roads, steep hillsides that the neighborhood would evacuate in a minimum order of 40 minutes. The comparison of the two models got peoples attention. We started generating a community fire plan and asked the County to conduct a "Fire Evacuation Task Force", a cooperative

interagency workshop. We worked on the challenges for three years. Unfortunately, the Fire Department was capable of managing their own assets better than determining the anticipated behavior of their constituency. We have a draft action plan. We could really use an adopted Evacuation plan right now.

judithleraascook Thank you! I am aware that you encountered several obstacles as you moved forward with the community plan. Would you tell us a little about them and share with us how they were surmounted?

tmsteale Years after that Task Force, we asked the County to conduct a community fire drill per our draft community fire plan we had written. The Fire department was very anxious in conducting such an event. We sculpted the participating area down to an area of 350 homes out of 1200. This allowed the drill to be manageable. The drill was a success and the neighboring community had a similar drill this year. Working with the government is critical to developing a better relationship. Discover the Department's limitations and address these limits, whether it is money, planning or staff.

judithleraascook Do you feel that work your community has put into the evacuation plan has benefitted your association's relationship with your local fire department?

tmsteale Definitely, right now Santa Barbara is facing the perfect storm. A fire burning for 33 days has run across the length of the County, it has a 45-mile long front. Previous work is always valuable to the department, especially now that the city is reinforced with Cal Fire crew from out of town. These state crews seem to be our fire department now, our crews are ten miles away on the front. The evacuation plan we drafted is the only logistical plan the County ever developed, very valuable.

judithleraascook It sounds as if the rubber is hitting the proverbial road. So as you developed the plan, was the community generally supportive? I feel sure they are now!

tmsteale Yes, we developed other ideas as well---Reverse 911 and "Emergency routes" across private property to eliminate the single exit circumstances. Each of these efforts takes years of trial and error.

judithleraascook What advice would you like to share with homeowners who want to create wildfire evacuation plans and other emergency strategies for their communities?

tmsteale yes, work with your local agencies, investigate the status quo. For example, as a generalization, most firemen's skills are reactive in nature; encourage your departments to be more proactive with your involvement.

judithleraascook Thank you, Tim! That was really great information. We will post the transcript of today's session in the 'ChatTranscripts' area of the Firewise forum very soon. The chat is now open to everyone. Feel free to ask questions of Tim, Michele and myself. If anything is not answered during the chat, you can contact me at firewiseusa@aol.com. I will either respond directly or put you into contact with someone who can get you your answer.

Jeff_Madden Did your plan include any shelter-in-place options? And if so, how did the local fire official feel about that?

tmsteale Previously, they had suggested a shelter in place strategy. Yet with the fuel load info available now, they suggest a early evac strategy. Our climate was designed to burn.

judithleraascook You had an evacuation plan in place. How did it fare?

Jeff_Madden So is anything being done to deal with the current fuel load (or is moot now)?

tmsteale The Fire department has not called the Mission Canyon area to be evacuated yet. Other smaller communities have evacuated beyond the ridge top mountains. The second Highway in the County is closed. All events so far have been very well behaved.

judithleraascook Good news.

tmsteale During the day the smoke drifts over the Central Valley, then towards sunset it drifts back over the coastline, showering us with ash. In the extreme, this is where the dangerous scenario lays. While we're sleeping.

judithleraascook What nights. I think Jeff is interested in fuel treatments that may be in the offing for the area. Any information on that?

tmsteale Well, we have the 100 ft. clearance around our homes. Most homes are on acre lots. That means 3/4 of the lot could still be in original chaparral. Tons of deadwood, tons per acre. We have several grants with the Fire Safe Council awarded to us to clear fuel, \$75,000.00 in total. It's a drop in the bucket. We are also working on a fire break along the perimeter of the developed area---30 % slopes with heavy vegetation.

judithleraascook Thanks, Tim! We are running up to our hour. Do we have any other questions for the speaker?

Mr_FL_Mit did you succeed in getting alternate escape routes across private properties?

tmsteale Yes. Last night I met with a doctor who participated with us. We watched the smoke come over the canyon and decided to widen the clearances on each side of the route we had worked on just in case. These routes are our "last resort" measures.

judithleraascook It has to be a relief to have them as options.

tmsteale Exactly

Jeff_Madden I know we are running out of time, but I'd love to know how you got the property owners to give you permission to create the emergency routes.

tmsteale It's a good question. We approached them and they agreed almost immediately. However, once implemented, many people became possessive of the new option. They didn't want everyone to know of the exit in fear of overrunning the road and their safety. We had a drill on this route as well

judithleraascook How interesting!

tmsteale Some fear behavior is to be expected. In time, people see the scale of their own needs and then the area's potential as well. It takes practice and a need to be safe.

judithleraascook Tim - We want to thank you again....most enthusiastically...for spending this hour with us. The session was SO timely.

tmsteale thank you Judith and Michele for inviting me.

judithleraascook The pleasure was ours. Our next chat will be held on Wednesday, September 12, when Michele will be our speaker. She is going to tell us about new NFPA standards, how they relate to community planning, and, subsequently, to homeowner associations and the regulations are involved with them. We can certainly use what we learned today!

tmsteale If you have any further need of info., you can link to www.missioncanyon.org.

judithleraascook Thanks, Tim. And thanks again for joining us. We will all be thinking of you this week, and until the end of wildfire season.

tmsteale bye

judithleraascook Bye!

Mr_FL_Mit Thank you my Firewise friends ::biggrin

judithleraascook Bye, Timber!

Michele_Steinberg Thanks so much! Bye now.

Zig Thank you Bye

Jeff_Madden Thanks Tim and all!

Harry_Steele Bye now

judithleraascook Thanks for joining us, Jeff and Harry!