

Subject: [Fwd: District of North Vancouver Hiccups: Episode 2]

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Subject: District of North Vancouver Hiccups: Episode 2

Date: Wed, 19 May 2004 20:46:19 +0100 (BST)

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19 May 2004

Greetings to All:

Early this morning, I was able to watch a very short portion of Rudy Giuliani's testimony to the 9/11 Commission of Enquiry. In it, he discussed and answered questions on 'chain of command' and communications issues. From here on, I will refer to him as Rudy - not with disrespect, but because my fingers often botch the spelling of his last name!

Senators and other questioners offered numerous compliments about Rudy's leadership example and his - I must say - non-arrogant pride in his city and its people. Above and beyond those qualities, what emerged from the discussion was his explanation about how his city's chain of command works in various types of emergency situations.

Emergencies, of course, range from the 'normal' ones of police, fire and ambulance events. Since 9/11, other more emergent items have been added... the need for 'alert and response' protocols for various terrorist activities: bio-hazard, chemical hazard, suicide bombings, hostage incidents and more.

Even before 9/11, Mayor Rudy had implemented an OEM - Office of Emergency Management. In effect, it is a coordination and dispatch system which establishes and maintains blueprints for emergency response. It activates, oversees and dispatches emergency services in extraordinary circumstances. To use a military term, OEM is an Operations Room in the event of major emergency events. It could even assume overall responsibility if a mayor was ill, away or worse.

Rudy said it goes without saying that if one is facing a criminal situation, the police are in charge, a fire - fire captains, medical...etc. That's normal. What complicates the situation is an escalation in size, nature, scope or impact of any given situation...particularly if/when terrorists are involved. In such instances, a police event could morph into a bio-hazard situation, etc.

Now I know Canada has not had any terrorist attacks, and the North Shore total population is only +/- 180,000. However, the initial problems with the forest fires in Barriere, Louis Creek etc., were complicated by a confusion of command and by poor communications between the various emergency services...between them and the media and, thus, between them and the people.

In BC, we have the Provincial Emergency Plan [PEP] and we each have our own fire, police and paramedic services. Despite all of that, North Shore municipalities *are* behind two bridges, we *do* have two separate types of police forces and we *are* vulnerable to earthquakes and forest fires.....let alone the more remote likelihood of an internationally-devised scheme.

After thinking about Rudy's comments, it set me to wondering if we should not be looking at cooperation between all five North Shore communities - perhaps, even, to include Squamish, Brackendale, Whistler and Pemberton. If those communities were to set up an OEM office and establish a formal chain of command and communication - both internal and external to the media - it could swing into action immediately just as soon as a North Shore Mayor declared an emergency.

In that way, I suggest, emergency services personnel would be absolutely clear about who was in charge and to whom they should report. Also, the media would know who to contact for calm and controlled information to communication to anxious citizens.

My suggestion is not at all meant as a knock on our current services. Rather, it is that I have a concern that we Canadians tend to become a tad complacent. 'Nothing really bad happens around here, so we expect nothing ever will'until it does.

Now, there may well be such an emergency plan in existence. Certainly, I see signs reading "Disaster Route" up and down Lynn Valley Road, but does that mean that, if an earthquake struck and Cleveland Dam burst its banks, that we can rely on one of our mayors to successfully 'deploy the troops' across the North Shore, in the manner of a Rudy?

Do the people know what to do - even in a typical BC situation that we should know how to handle? Personally, I don't think we know much more than to pick up a hose, drop-roll-get under a desk and call 911. In fact, I bet our school-kids know more than most adults! And I'll wager 9 out of 10 homes don't have an emergency medical kit and food supply.

I've seen nothing put out to the people that answers the following questions:

- What if a real emergency struck the District, who is in charge?
- What if an emergency struck elsewhere on the North Shore, who is in overall charge? Is it a Mayor? Which one?
- Is there an OEM in this region and, if so, who/where is it? Is it PEP? Because if it is PEP, that was one of the initial major problems in Barriere, Louis Creek, etc. The PEP guy sat behind a 4 x 8 table and refused to tell anyone anything about anything, until 'someone from somewhere' went in to tell him the community was falling down around his ears! [Sorry, guys, but that's telling it like it is from the community's perspective and, yes, I have talked with citizens up there - many times during and since the fires, even to the point of finding them some insurance appraisers and a lawyer.]

In Kelowna, even after British Columbians had learned some from the Barriere experience, Fire Chief Gerry Zimmerman indicated that chain of command and communications had been a problem. Local emerg services, who knew which end was up in their communities, received conflicting information and commands from people up the chain who didn't know the local situation.

I'm not saying that would happen on the North Shore, but I think we need to get proactive to make *sure* it doesn't happen here.

- So, if there is an OEM, what is the chain of command between it and our local emergency services?
- Who is designated as Chief Communications Officer - for the whole North Shore - and do *all* emergency personnel know that all information is to be channelled there for calm and controlled release to citizens?

In closing, as I was proof-reading this message, I received a copy of an email Clr. Crist sent to CAO Ridge. It covered a relatively minor hiccup in District road services. However, that minor hiccup was a graphic illustration of what could happen in a major North Shore emergency - IF a system akin to New York's OEM - Office of Emergency Management - is not in place and functional BEFORE we encounter an emergency.

Again...if we already have an OEM-type system in place....the above suggestions will be redundant...except...that I believe there is a need for its existence needs to be publicized more widely and more often.

I would appreciate hearing reaction from Council...particularly from Clr. McKeon-Holmes and Mr. Ridge.

Thanks for being patient enough to read this.....

Liz James
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One comment Rudy made was that, in the 9/11 crisis, egos were dropped and emergency services all pulled together. He went on to explain that was able to happen because OEM took charge overall. He said problems still arose but were a lot less evident that might otherwise have been the case. He expressed understanding for the loss of family members - 400 or so firefighters, but put the picture into perspective by saying that, of everyone in the WTC and the fire services - close to 30,000 people - over 97% of human lives were spared. He also said that, sadly, when evacuation orders were issued, some fire captains interpreted that as, "make sure you get all your men out, but if you're helping out an overweight man in a wheelchair, stick with it." Rudy explained that, unfortunately, they lost some top-notch personnel that way.

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