

May 19, 2011 BDPNNetwork Meeting Minutes

Norine Smith opened the meeting with a review of upcoming events and problems on the horizon.

First, the announcement of the Alameda County Public Health Emergency Preparedness Fair on May 26, 2011, from 10 am to 3 pm. Go to this website for more information:

http://www.acphd.org/documents/Opln_POSTER_Public.pdf

A reminder for everyone to join the Yahoo group to ensure you are receiving all pertinent emails from the BPDNN. It's a great place to share information with other groups and learn about new training opportunities, for example. Go to this website and choose JOIN:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bdpnn/>

Also, make sure you sign up for the database and join the Google map project. This map shows the active groups within Berkeley so that other groups can see who is nearby, and groups can coordinate planning/drill activities before the quake, and groups can coordinate rescue efforts after the quake. Don't miss out on this valuable resource.

Remember to write your federal representatives and tell them to OPPOSE HR 607. If this bill passes, it will eliminate the frequencies that walkie-talkies use, and our disaster plans will be severely impacted if we lose that communication capability.

Norine introduced the guest speaker for the evening, Tom Guarino, who is the East Bay Media Relations Representative for PG&E. Tom started with a summary of the projects that PG&E is working on in the Berkeley area, including programs at the YMCA and working with Collaborating Agencies Respond to Disasters (CARD). Also, PG&E is retrofitting and updating some of the older gas pipeline infrastructure in response to the San Bruno incident.

The next BDPNN meeting will be a radio practice session, most likely at the Berkeley Marina. It will be held on Saturday Aug 13. Mark your calendars!

Then Norine and Tom went through the list of questions that we sent in before the meeting, in addition to questions from the audience, and here is a summary of the main points. The meeting was also videotaped, so soon that will be posted on YouTube, with the links announced on the Yahoo page.

- PG&E has an Incident Command System modeled after the FEMA system, operating 24/7 every day, responding to daily problems. The Incident Command Centers that work with Berkeley are located in Richmond and Oakland. These centers would be responsible for the response to any problems in Berkeley.

- However, our first action for any emergency is to call 911 (if available) or get a message to the nearest fire station. The Berkeley Office of Emergency Services (OES), including the fire dept and police dept, are the actual first responders and are trained to handle initial actions to reduce the threat of a crisis situation involving PG&E resources.

- PG&E has several methods of communicating with the OES units in each city and county. Primary is land line phones and cell phones. If those are inoperative, then there are multiple radio systems including ham radios and satellite phones. Every major PG&E site has backup generators in case power is severely disrupted in the area.

- In case of a regional disaster (such as a major earthquake), Alameda County OES would be responsible for coordinating the actions of the PG&E responders.
- There is staged repair equipment throughout the region, including East Bay and Berkeley. This equipment would be available for quicker emergency and repair response when roads are blocked or collapsed. In addition, PG&E has a helicopter to do on-site assessments and marine assets (ships, etc.) in case bridges are gone.
- PG&E does not shut down gas and electric automatically during an earthquake. They rely upon the information that goes into the Command Centers from the new Smart Meters. The Smart Meters create a Smart Grid which monitors the systems throughout the area. Right now Berkeley is about 80% complete with Smart Meter installation. The Smart Grid can detect a problem instantly, and in most cases the system can respond automatically to the problem. Otherwise, and until the entire area is on Smart Meters, it is a manual response to emergencies that is directed by the Command Centers to the PG&E field units.
- How long should a downed power line be treated as active? FOREVER, until the power line is repaired and back on the pole. Never think for a second that a downed power line is dead. This includes the entire downed line, not just the broken end. And, if the power line is not broken but maybe just fell off the pole, you still consider the entire line active. Keep everyone at least 20 feet away from a downed line, and ensure that the area is clearly marked and cordoned off to keep everyone away.
- If the phones are working, you should try to contact PG&E directly to report a downed power line at 800-PGE-5002 (800-743-5002). However, if possible, you should call 911 because the fire dept is the designated first responder. If the phones are not working, you need to get a message to the nearest fire dept about the problem in any way you can. All OES units are connected to PG&E to call for assistance after the first response is taken care of.
- PG&E has established agreements with other organizations (including out of state) to borrow people to help repair/rebuild the system after a disaster. PG&E did this for New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, sending some of their folks to help rebuild after the hurricane.
- Are there any hidden dangers from having underground power systems (instead of wires above ground)? There are fewer safety concerns with the underground power systems. There are much lower risks of exposed wires. It is possible to have an underground collapse or even an explosion in certain circumstances. In the latter case, the only danger would be avoiding flying manhole covers and other debris. Otherwise, there are no hidden dangers.
- What can a neighborhood group do if they MUST move a downed power line or get to someone who desperately needs help near a downed power line? The most important thing to remember is to WEIGH THE RISK TO THE BENEFIT. Your best option is to GO AROUND THE WIRE and avoid it, if you can.
- There are special boots and gloves that the fire dept and electricians use when operating near live wires, but these are not 100% reliable. In almost all cases, the responders avoid the wire completely until the power is turned off.
- Wood only provides SOME insulating capabilities. If the power is strong enough, it can travel through the wood and give the person a deadly shock. If the wood is wet, this is even more

dangerous because the water makes the wood a worse insulator and a better conductor, allowing the electricity to travel through it easier. This is also true about wood that has nails or other metal imbedded in it.

- Neighborhoods can get specialized training from their fire dept or possibly CARD on things that can be done with a downed power line and no responders are available. BDPNN is currently checking with Berkeley Fire Dept to see if this training can be implemented.

- One option that might be considered (again weighing risk and benefit) if you must cross a downed power line to get to safety is to drive a newer model car across the power line to the other side. Newer cars are made more of synthetic-based materials that don't conduct electricity as well as the metal of older cars. Also, electricity will tend to travel on the outside of the car if it comes into contact with it. That's why you are safer inside a car during a lightning storm than out in the open. One danger, however is that the newer car's electrical system is more susceptible to getting hit by the live wire, and it might short out, making the car stop on top of the power line. Again, you must weight the risk and the benefit.

- Although a bicycle's tires are made of rubber and have insulating abilities, there is too much risk that the wire will move and strike the metal part of the bicycle, thus shocking the rider. This is especially true when you drive over it.

- If it's dark when the earthquake happens, and the power goes out, you must weigh the risk of going outside without being able to see the downed power lines, or waiting until daylight to perform search and rescue, etc. Talk about this with your neighborhood group members.

- Why are the automatic gas shutoff valves installed after the meter instead of before? This is because PG&E owns the meter and the gas line up to the meter, and everything else past the meter is the owner's property. It is inconvenient for an apartment building with several units, since it would be simpler to install one shutoff instead of 10, for example. Perhaps the owner of the building can get permission from PG&E for a single valve before the meter?

- What about turning on the gas after it's been shut off? Realize it is dangerous to turn on the gas after it's been shut off by the automatic feature after an earthquake. The main reason is that the automatic shutoff is ensuring that, if there is a leak in the system, your house won't have a problem because the gas is turned off. Without checking for leaks first (using a sniffing device), you are taking a big chance that there is no leak. The additional problem is that you have to know exactly how to relight the pilot lights, and knowing where ALL of them are located. It is best to wait for a PG&E technician or licensed contractor first to check the system and then to turn the gas back on.

- When PG&E comes to turn the gas back on, they first will check the house for gas leaks using a sniffing device. If they detect a leak, the house will be "red tagged" and will not be allowed to have the gas turned back on until the leak is fixed. Because of all the pipes in the walls, floors, ceilings, etc., this could take a very long time to track down, and you will have to hire a contractor to fix the problem.

- Many of the older homes in the area already have tiny gas leaks now that might not be detectable by your nose. You can purchase a sniffing device in advance of a disaster and sniff the entire house for leaks. That way, you'll know if the house already has a problem, and it isn't safe to turn the gas back on without having the whole system checked first. An automatic shutoff valve would be a prudent investment in this case.

- Another option is to buy the gas leak shutoff valves. Instead of triggering on ground shaking (like the earthquake shutoff valves), the gas leak shutoff valves detect actual leaks in the system (changes in pressure) and shut down the gas, regardless of whether it's an earthquake or some other random problem.

- Remember that exposure to natural gas can kill you, and this is not from the explosion threat. That is why the gas smells bad. Natural gas is odorless in its natural form, but the rotten eggs smell is added so that you can detect the gas and get out of the area. Natural gas will kill you like carbon monoxide does, so if you detect even a low concentration of natural gas, you must leave the immediate area.

- It is a good idea to make sure that your gas shutoff valve (the manual one at the meter) actually turns. You don't have to turn it all the way (otherwise you have to go through the trouble of relighting the pilot lights) but just make sure it moves. If not, you can spray the valve with WD-40 lubricant and wait a few days, then try again.

- In an emergency, if you can't turn off a gas valve using the standard wrench, you can extend the handle of the wrench using a long pipe that fits over the handle. Then the wrench has a longer lever arm, and you will have more torque to move the valve. Tapping on the valve with a rubberized mallet may also help, but do not hit it hard or you will cause more problems.

- After a disaster, the bigger dangers than gas and electric problems are carbon monoxide poisoning and smoke inhalation. This is due to the temporary facilities because of no power or gas, such as cooking on a propane stove or barbecue grill, or using candles for light/heat.

- If you are replacing your smoke detectors in the near future, consider a multi-purpose detector that uses both photoelectric (for smoldering fires) and ionizing sensors (for fast-burning fires), plus a carbon monoxide detector. There are restrictions on which sensors to use near bathrooms and kitchens, however, so check the rules before you buy.

- What about solar powered systems? Can they be used if the power is out? It depends upon whether the system is linked to the grid or off grid. If it's linked to the grid, the system probably requires electrical power to connect the solar panels to the house via the inverter. This is normally provided by the grid, so your solar powered system would need to be checked to see what its inverter requirements are. You may just need a generator to power the inverter. If the solar powered system is off the grid, then it will continue to operate normally when the grid goes down, of course.

- How long will it take PG&E to repair the systems after a quake? If the quake is large, it may take 1-2 months depending upon the damage. Every family should have several emergency plans depending upon the severity of the quake. If you can shelter in place in your home for a few days to a few weeks, then that is one plan. If not, then you should have a pre-arranged location out of the area where you can stay. This is especially important for people who require electricity for medical equipment, or families with children, or elderly people who require special assistance, or in areas where extreme heat or cold are a problem without power. A 1-2 month timeframe without electricity or gas would be a hardship on most families.

- If you leave the area, make sure you turn off the gas, water, and electricity in your house before you leave. When the utilities come back on, and you aren't home, you want the systems

to be off until you are home and able to monitor the situation, in case you detect a problem and can do something about it.

- What about training non-PG&E personnel (such as already licensed contractors) to be emergency PG&E workers that can turn off the manual systems in a major disaster when PG&E can't get to the immediate area? PG&E already has a training program for licensed contractors that is free of charge, but the training involves the latest technologies for energy efficiency/conservation and green systems. This training is offered at the San Francisco and Stockton facilities. However, PG&E is currently not offering training on how to be emergency technicians in neighborhoods, nor in integrating the trainees into a network. This idea will be explored by the BDPNN with PG&E.