

Expecting the unexpected



AT LEAST TWICE, and sometimes three times each year, the City of Kelowna's Emergency Operations Centre holds mock disaster sessions involving civic officials from many departments, including materials and procurement. Ron Reiter, manager of purchasing and stores for the Okanagan Valley municipality of 100,000, has participated in these dry runs for several years and notes that, for him, the exercises are useful, but only to a point. "The problem is," Reiter notes, "you can't really predict what your requirements will be until a disaster happens. In our case, it was a fire."

In August 2003, rampaging forest fires roared out of control for several weeks in south central British Columbia and Kelowna was close to the centre of it. The inferno incinerated thousands of hectares of forest, destroyed dozens of homes and businesses in several communities, tested the limits of firefighters as well as Canadian Armed Forces personnel assisting them, and created a smoky haze that hovered over much of the province, crossed the Rockies and settled over southern Alberta.

"I don't know that you can ever be totally prepared," says Reiter. "There's no budget for that sort of thing. You do what you have to do."

In his case, that meant working long days, usually from 7:30 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week until the fires were extinguished. He had to ensure that the city had food for the 300-400 firefighters and about 800 military personnel fighting blazes around Kelowna. He brought in Gatorade by the pallet. He also had to maintain a consistent supply of fuel for dozens of emergency vehicles. One day, at 11 p.m., Reiter phoned the owner of a local Canadian Tire outlet at home and got him to open his store to fill an order for 80-100 headlamps for firefighter helmets.

While every emergency will place different demands on all municipal personnel, experts say that being prepared is essential. It is also the law. Most provinces have emergency measures legislation on the books that either encourages or requires municipalities to prepare disaster response plans, and rightly so. In recent

years, Canadian communities have had to cope with a remarkably diverse series of natural and man-made disasters – everything from floods and power blackouts to ice storms and, of course, hurricanes and blizzards.

Last April, Ontario proclaimed a new *Emergency Readiness Act*, which stipulates that each municipality in the province develop a Community Emergency Management Program based upon international best practices. These programs are to be built around four pillars: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. The objective was to make communities more resilient in the face of emergencies and better able to cope with them.

"We've entered a new era," says Charles Whitlock, chief purchasing officer with the Regional Municipality of Waterloo in southern Ontario. "I see purchasing and procurement being involved in the preparedness, the response and the recovery phases. As part of our emergency plan, we define the roles and responsibilities of the chief purchasing officer. We want to make sure there is as little interruption as possible in the flow of supplies."

For a procurement officer, one crucial element of preparedness is to ensure that agreements are in place with suppliers so that the delivery of goods and services will continue during an emergency.

Whitlock says that Waterloo has 32 pumping stations to deliver water throughout the region and he has developed measures to guarantee that generators are available for

each, should the power supply be disrupted. He also has agreements with suppliers to make certain that the municipality would have the fuel necessary to run the generators, and this includes a list of suppliers' phone numbers – business, home, cells and pagers.

Whitlock notes that municipalities cannot afford to stockpile goods, especially when they never know in advance the nature of an emergency. Therefore, procurement officers need to be in a position to secure goods and services as quickly as possible. "You can't spend five hours fumbling through the phone books looking for local suppliers," he says.

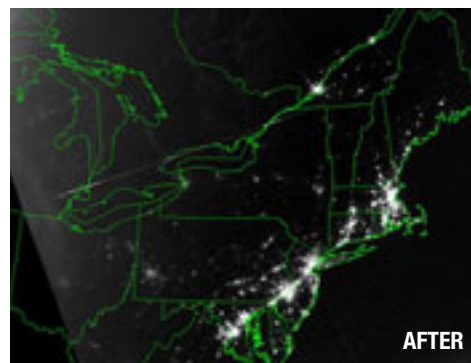
Municipalities prepare for emergency situations



BEFORE

Summer 2003. This pair of satellite images shows the extent of the major power outage that hit a large section of Ontario and several US states. On August 14, the energy grid collapsed in under 10 seconds following a power surge out of Ohio, shutting down power for over 50 million people.

Chris Elvidge, US Air Force. http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/natural_hazards_v2.php?img_id=11628



AFTER



Autumn 2003. Sparked by a lightning strike, the Okanagan Mountain fire took five weeks to contain, destroying over 25 thousand hectares and over 230 homes, and at one point, forced the evacuation of 30 percent of the City of Kelowna. Heat and smoke seared the air for several weeks in BC as over 800 other fires burned throughout the province. Kelowna fire images are courtesy of citizens of Kelowna. Available at www.dotcommediainc.com.

Waterloo has developed a comprehensive resource directory as part of its Community Emergency Management Program and Whitlock says it sits on his desk all the time. The directory assesses a number of hazardous situations such as plane crashes, chemical spills and fires and then lists the types of things necessary to respond adequately in worst-case scenarios. It contains addresses of all churches and community centres that could be used as shelters should there be a major evacuation. It includes a section on how to obtain and deliver food supplies if a large number of people took refuge in shelters. There is also a section on transportation and the use of city buses should local residents need to be evacuated.



Winter 2004. Snow began to fall February 18, 2004 on Halifax, NS. When it stopped around midnight on February 19th, the city was blanketed by a record-breaking 95 cm., virtually paralyzing the city for several days as every plow, publicly and privately-owned, went to work clearing the roads.

Waterloo, like other regional municipalities, is a two-tier system of government with officials operating at both the regional and local levels. Whitlock says that communication and the coordination of efforts between procurement officers at both levels is an important component of an emergency management program.

The City of Hamilton had developed a comprehensive strategy well in advance of the new *Emergency Readiness Act*, and for good reason. Municipal officials there have had to deal with several extraordinary situations in recent years, including the unscheduled arrival of commercial American aircraft at the local airport due to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Emergency Management Coordinator Bill Pasel says Hamilton's program operates on the principle of quick and direct com-

munication between emergency workers at the site of the disaster and a support group comprising the mayor, councillors and department heads, including purchasing, who station themselves in the council chambers at city hall. Members of the support group, in turn, must be in contact with police, fire, ambulance and other services to direct the flow of equipment and other resources to the site of the emergency.

Everyone with a role to play in managing emergencies participates in a mock disaster once a year. Pasel says the exercise is as large and sophisticated as a Broadway production. The key to making it all work is strong support from the mayor's office and a spirit of collaboration among city departments and agencies.

Last August municipalities across southern Ontario had to deal with one of the biggest emergencies in recent memory when a power failure left 50 million people in the province and neighbouring American states without electricity, in some cases for more than 24 hours. Pasel says civic officials in Hamilton used backup generators – and the green power of its district energy system, which can be detached from the provincial grid – to restore electricity to city hall and a number of civic buildings shortly after the blackout began. The city's Emergency Management Program worked so well, he adds, that Hamilton was one of the first of the affected communities to restore full services.

"In the event of a municipal emergency, you really have to think outside the box," he says. "You're limited only by your imagination because there are so many variables and intangibles involved."

In a broader emergency, like last summer's forest fires in British Columbia, resources can be taxed at all levels and officials can be left scrambling for equipment. Provincial officials at the Regional Emergency Centre in Kamloops needed a high-speed copier one weekend in August in order to print internal communications documents, information packages for the media, and thousands of evacuation notices for homeowners in affected communities. They located the manager of a print shop at The University College of the Cariboo and convinced him to part, temporarily, with a copier. They loaded the machine into the back of a pickup truck and hauled it to the emergency centre.

"You can't anticipate 100 percent of your needs for a specific emergency," says one official. "And emergencies are not confined to office hours, Monday to Friday. They happen 24/7." *mm*

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