

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

What's the plan?

By Steve Haynes

The Greensburg tornado may have been a wake-up call for many Kansas communities, prompting action on emergency plans that federal and state law, hurricanes, snowstorms and even "free" federal money haven't accomplished.

About time, huh?

Sherman County has a committee working on a new plan, which is required by federal law. The planning group, which met this week, needs to get the document together, and then the county should plan and execute another disaster exercise.

How else will people know what they are supposed to do? You can read a plan, but only when you set out to do the tasks involved will most people learn how difficult they really are.

Most of us learn by making mistakes, and during an exercise, at least no one will die from them, designated casualties aside.

All groups involved in a potential disaster — city and county law enforcement and fire fighters, health care agencies, the hospital and clinic, the newspaper and radio station, city and county commissioners, public works crews, you name it — need to work together on a joint plan, tied together so when a tornado or other disaster does strike, everyone will be on the same page. Officials in outlying towns ought to be involved as well.

It's not likely that a major event will strike solely within city limits. And in a real disaster, even Goodland will need the county's help. Smaller towns depend on the county for emergency services, so county officials will be involved if anything happens in one of them.

Many things must be planned: who's in charge, where coordinators will work, who does what, where do you call for help. Everyone from the police to the electric crew to the street department, plus firemen, cops and deputies, will need to know where to gather and what to do. Citizens need to know, too.

Planning needs to cover the obvious, such as how to handle the injured and how to secure the area, to the not-so-obvious. Someone will have to issue curfew and damaged-area passes, checking credentials and identification.

Outside rescuers, state and national reporters, television crews, helpers and volunteers all would need some kind of pass. People who live in the damage zone will need passes to get back to their property. One Kansas city used blank printed utility bills, difficult to forge quickly and unique, to make up passes.

Most importantly, everyone will need to know who is in charge. In an emergency, there'll be no time to decide if the sheriff or police chief gives the orders to law enforcement, or whether county commissioners or the mayor take overall command.

All of that mitigates for a unified county plan agreed to by everyone. Then comes the really hard part:

The plan needs to be publicized and distributed to everyone who has a stake in it, and that is pretty much all of us. Federal law not only requires states and counties to have emergency plans, it requires them to be open for public inspection, and with good reason.

If a plan requires evacuation or blocking off a damaged area, or any one of a million other things, we all need to know. The whole county deserves to know how the plan reads, how it will work and how it proves out in an exercise, because it's our lives, our property and our towns that will be at stake.

A good start has been made by the city and the county, but a lot more needs to be done, and quickly, because tornado season is upon us. — *Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press*



Memorable ride

Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I stand



If time allows on Sunday, give or take 30 minutes either side of high noon, try and make it to an overpass over Interstate 70 and watch some 500 plus motorcyclists pass through the area.

These riders will be making their way from California to Washington, D.C., for the Memorial Day Sunday ride called Rolling Thunder Ride for Freedom. This annual trek which started in 1989 allows motorcyclists to join the ride Run for the Wall which will culminate with about 500,000 strong as they ride from the Pentagon to the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, also known as The Wall.

Men, women and children, and a few pets in tow, will leave Limon, Colo., Sunday morning and roar through Colby and stop for gas and their noon meal in Oakley.

If you've never heard the hum of several hundred motorcycles, including the well known low tone of the Harley Davidson which is keen to many vets, I encourage you to hang out at one of Interstate 70s overpasses between 11 a.m. and noon on Sunday.

If you happen to take along a youngster, please make sure they know that those riding in the group have been or currently support our nation's right to bear arms and protect ourselves, whether privately or publicly through one of the military branches.

Anyone who has spent any amount of time with someone involved with the Run for the Wall will soon learn the group's mission statement,

philosophy and goals. Their mission statement is to promote healing among all veterans and their families and friends, to call for an accounting of all Prisoners of War and those Missing in Action, and to honor the memory of those Killed in Action from all wars.

Their philosophy is that they strive to maintain a safe, supportive and private atmosphere in which all participants can reflect and heal on their journey to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. in the hope that they can return home to a new beginning.

Their goals to guide the participants safely across America; educate future generations as to the importance of accountability in wartime actions emphasizing that no one should be left behind; and participate in Rolling Thunder in support of their demand for government accountability for POW/MIAs.

If you do happen to take the time to go out and watch the riders, you might consider taking a flag to wave above them and please don't for-

get to offer a salute as they go by.

They'll deeply appreciate your respect and honor. More information is on the net at www.rftw.org.

Speaking of motorcycles, I've owned a few in my 52 years, but I've out grown that bug-in-my-teeth stage of life. So I thought. Just as recent as a week ago, I visited with a friend who was letting his Harley Davidson warm up before taking it out for a ride.

I wondered what the bandage on his knee was all about, and he said he'd laid the bike over on that knee. Fortunately the injury was not severe, but it was enough that just by looking at it caused my wanderlust moment to pass.

I'm as adventuresome as the next, but at \$3 plus for a gallon of gas I'm staying pretty close to home these days.

I heard a report on the nightly news though that caught my attention.

The reporter said despite gas being at its highest price ever in the United States consumption had not lessened. Ouch. Are we Americans goofy or would we rather just be independent, no matter the cost?

For me, \$3 plus a gallon for gas makes as much sense as a \$2,000 toilet seat on a jumbo jet. But, due to the fact I'm not a policy-maker in Washington, D.C. I guess I will just keep quiet and sit out this dance.

— *Jan Katz Ackerman is a reporter for the Colby Free Press.*

Old warhorses

Jay Kelley

• Speaking MyMind



On May 17, 1987, the USS Stark was hit by two Exocet missiles fired by an Iraqi Mirage fighter. The missiles not only damaged the ship badly, but also killed many of the senior enlisted personal key to any successful damage control efforts.

Late that night, USS Waddell arrived to lend aid to the stricken ship. USS Conyngham followed suit.

The next morning, USS Coontz, in port and refueling, stripped all but one repair locker of men and material which were flown out to the Stark by helicopter.

What the rescue parties saw when they arrived boggled the mind. The ship was listing badly to port with a 30-foot hole in her side pouring smoke and flame.

The fire main had been cut, effectively shutting off any firefighting water forward and forcing hoses to be laid across the smoking decks from the stern, where there was still an operating fire pump.

Rescue crews battled heat and smoke, many of them becoming overcome with smoke inhalation or exhaustion.

Some of the team members would later say they thought the ship lost, but no one voiced that thought at the time. The only goal was to save the ship and account for the men who were still missing.

After fighting their way through the twisted wreckage, which included at one point climb-

ing down a ladder into a compartment that was both flooding and on fire, they were then confronted with the bodies of the men who had not survived.

On the first level there was nothing recognizable, but as they got lower in the ship, they found the bodies of men who were trapped and who had died waiting to be rescued.

They had been too late and the fact that they had done more than was humanly possible was no comfort.

As the ship was towed into port, the crews removed the bodies, cleared away wreckage and generally finished the overhaul phase. Some were taken off; he first crews to arrive were the first to be sent back to their ships.

The crew from Coontz was the last to leave, after Stark's crew could again operate their ship while under tow. They were taken to USS LaSalle, the flagship, fed and given places to rest until they could be returned to their ship.

There were only enough breathing apparatus canisters in the squadron to outfit one ship and

other damage control equipment was equally scarce, so Coontz was left on patrol until replacement equipment was brought in.

The attack was determined to be an accident — which is actually probably true — and there were no repercussions against the Iraqi government. Stark was repaired and spent another 10 years in service before falling victim to the cutbacks of the 1990s.

Most of my readers know of my interest and education in history, but this is no mere historical narrative to me. You see, I was part of the rescue party sent over from USS Coontz.

I lived those events and from time to time I still have the nightmares. This article isn't about me, though, it is about all of us. Every year, some of us from Coontz still get together and reminisce. We are all older, grayer and slower.

For some of us, Stark was the only action we ever saw. Others spent time in Beirut, Libya, Central America and other hot spots of the 1980s.

Three of us (of whom I am aware) are still serving in the US Navy. We definitely don't agree on politics, but we are all patriots. We do, however, agree with two things.

The United States is the greatest country on earth and each of us would gladly die defending her today.

Jay Kelley is a local writer who speaks his mind from time to time. His e-mail is jkelly@st-tel.net.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce

Tinsley



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John Van Nostrand - Publisher

jvannostrand@nwkans.com

NEWS

Patty Decker - Editor

pdecker@nwkans.com

Tisha Cox - General Assignment

tcx@nwkans.com

Jan Katz Ackerman, Area Reporter

ackermanjk@ruraltel.net

ADVERTISING

Crystal Rucker - Advertising Sales/Director

crystalr@nwkans.com

Kristi Powell - Advertising Sales

kpowell@nwkans.com

Emily Wederski - Advertising Sales

ewederski@nwkans.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Jeanette Applegate - Bookkeeping, Ad Building

japplegate@nwkans.com

Everett Robert - Circulation, Classifieds

erobert@nwkans.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator

support@nwkans.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Jim Bowker - General Manager

Richard Westfahl, Lana Westfahl, Judy McKnight, Jim Jackson, DeLisa Allen, David Erickson, Betty Morris, and Dana Huthansel

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