

Summary of Discussion on “How to Organize Your Block” at the TONA General Meeting, Thursday 5/11/06

Panelists were Karen Chapman from 1800 block of San Lorenzo, Marian Magid from the 800/900 block of Mendocino Ave., Claire Magowan from the 600 block of Neilson St., and Lester Margolies from the 600 block of Santa Rosa Ave.

How do blocks get organized?

Lester’s block organized in 1984 with a Crime Watch [also called Neighborhood Watch] neighborhood meeting, held in one person’s home. Neighbors paid \$10 per family to have Crime Watch signs posted on the street. They organized an email group. He is volunteering to help get other blocks started now.

Marian’s block organized 35 years ago when an accident suffered by one family brought her neighbors together. A representative of the Fire Department came to a gathering to present information.

Marian noted that each block needs a coordinator, or block captain, and subcommittees to handle different aspects of disaster preparedness: search and rescue, first aid, communication, and the like. (A handout at the meeting listed the roles the city suggests.)

Claire’s was the second neighborhood in Berkeley to get organized. Usually a “spark plug” person is the catalyst to organize. You need people willing to take initiative.

Karen’s block was already organized when she moved there, but the block captains who got things going were moving away, so she stepped in and organized the planting of street trees. She uses email a lot to keep the group going. She puts an agreed-on word or abbreviation in the subject line so recipients can easily identify that it’s a block notice, not spam. She organizes around issues (e.g., traffic).

What are the first organizing steps?

Start with a flyer announcing a meeting at one neighbor’s house. Have a speaker from the city talk about disaster prep. Dory Erlich, the city contact from Community Emergency Response Training (CERT), 981-5506. will speak to block groups about supplies to gather and other preparations.

Use a form to compile information on each household: names, contacts, children, and pets of each home; who is home during the day; what skills (e.g., medical) and equipment (e.g., ladders, crowbars) neighbors have. (A sample form was available as a handout at the meeting.) Each family should list three contact people in case of disaster.

The group needs to develop a phone tree and email list. It’s also helpful to create a schematic map of your block, showing where the gas, electrical, and water shut-offs are for each home, and distribute the map to all the households. Use G = gas, E = electrical, W = water.

Is a Neighborhood Watch group different from a Disaster Preparedness group?

Yes, in some respects, but a block can organize to be both.

The police department's Community Services Bureau, (510) 981-5808 or www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/police/department/communityservicesbureau/neighborhoodwatch.html, will send you a startup packet for organizing as a Neighborhood Watch group. The dues are \$15 per group per year. If you hold two official meetings (that is, meetings at which a beat officer or other city official is present), your block will get a free dumpster one weekend a year plus a first aid kit and fire extinguisher. Neighborhood Watch groups can attend Police Department and Car Safety seminars that are very helpful about crime prevention.

The city's Disaster Preparedness office (www.getreadyberkeley.org or www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/disasterresistant/) gives free classes at the Fire Department on Cedar Street on Saturday mornings with tons of good information on specific preparedness skills; call 981-5799 or check the city website www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/fire/cert.html for a schedule. Sam Hoffman's classes are great. The fire suppression training is recommended by the fire department, since streets are likely to be impassable.

The Berkeley Safe Neighborhoods Committee offers an informative overview on how to organize a meeting at one person's home, at www.bsnc.org/minigrouptext, which is taken from the city publication "The Disaster Preparedness Handbook."

The city assumes that infrastructure will be damaged. University Avenue has been designated a main street for bringing food supplies into the city. On Claire's block, marathon bikers have volunteered to transport food by bike if cars are unusable.

The city's handouts have lots of contact info about specific committees and resources around town. Berkeley Safe Neighborhoods Committee and other city officials are very enthusiastic about helping neighbors organize their blocks.

What supplies and equipment should the block and the individual households have?

The city website at www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/fire/earthquake.htm has lists of what household supply caches should contain.

A member of the audience from the 800 block of Neilson Street said her block assembled its households' preparedness kits in incremental steps at meetings every couple of months to avoid overwhelming everyone. They started with a gas valve turn-off wrench (\$3 each), first aid kits, map plans, outside California contact info. They recommend Rubbermaid Roughneck containers to hold the kit for each family.

Claire suggested using camping supplies and equipment. She has "the throne," an adult emergency toilet, and two kerosene lamps, for example. Each household should have a cache with enough food and equipment to take care of its members for several days.

To store water for the initial days after a disaster, get large water containers on wheels so you can manually transport them to and from a water source.

Each household should also have a white and a green piece of cloth. After an emergency, if you are OK and staying at home, you put a white cloth in view at the front door. If you are OK but leaving your home, you put a green cloth in view at the front door. Then search-and-rescue teams will not spend time searching unnecessarily.

Some blocks, like Marion's, have group supplies (to supplement individual household caches) in containers located at homes at each end of the block. Some blocks have bought a generator (which costs about \$500–\$700). The city website at www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/fire/oes.html has info for people or blocks considering a generator. A member of the audience suggested that people might even think about buying a photovoltaic cell (solar energy cell) for power, although this costs thousands of dollars. It can be used to supply your power every day, not just in emergencies, to reduce your utility bill.

One neighbor in the audience installed an automatic shut-off valve for his gas line for a couple of hundred dollars. He also recommended getting walkie-talkies so that family members can communicate if they are separated when a disaster occurs, since phone lines and cell phones may not be working. He found a shortwave radio for \$50 at Home Depot and said that podcasting is another option in an emergency. If a block buys walkie-talkies for everyone, Karen suggested that one channel be reserved for the captains and another for emergency info. On the radio, 1610-AM is Berkeley's emergency information station.

Claire noted that the city has available four disaster-preparedness caches for District 5. Each cache is a 3-by-6-foot shed containing hose connections for the fire hydrants, gearing the water pressure down to a level that laypeople can handle, shovels, flashlights, batteries, ladders, and the like. To apply for one, contact Carol Lopes, 981-5576 or clopes@ci.berkeley.ca.us.

Have there been privacy issues about the block residents' information sheets?

The panelists reported no resistance or objections so far. Households offer their information voluntarily. It's important to update the sheets about twice a year.

Information on the sheets has also been useful for Crime Watch purposes. Claire was able to alert parents at their jobs when she saw strangers approaching their children on the block, so the parents could call the babysitter to take the children away.

The list also lets neighbors know who is home during the day.

How is a neighborhood defined for organizing?

The city recommends groups of one block length, including both sides of the street.

How often does your neighborhood group meet?

Karen's block meets twice a year, and Neighborhood Watch groups meet at least that often. Others meet more frequently or less, sometimes sporadically.

Do organized blocks serve other needs than disaster prep?

Marian's block now holds annual events on their street, such as a Mother's Day block party.

Claire's block holds an Oktoberfest and Yard Sale each year, which pays for the Neighborhood Watch annual dues. The city will stop traffic on your block with wood horses for organized block parties.

Panelists agreed that organizing fun activities helps to build relationships and a sense of community on the block. Neighbors who previously never even said hello became friendly at block meetings and activities and now enjoy one another's company.

Are there designated places in the Thousand Oaks neighborhood for people to gather after the disaster if they can't remain at home?

Generally, the city advises having a family plan about where to go and not to expect government help for several days.

St. Albans Church, on Washington Street at Curtis, is interested in being a disaster center for Albany; it isn't known whether Berkeley residents would be eligible to go there.

Some organized blocks designate a gathering place (or two).

An audience member who works at the library said that the central library lobby will be used as a registration center.

Another audience member cautioned, don't rely on the city. Organize so that your home and block are prepared, independent of city services. A third audience member noted that a speaker from the fire department told his neighborhood group, don't expect help for five to seven days after an emergency.

Is there a contact list of block leaders, so they can share information and resources in case of disaster?

TONA is trying to develop a list of the block captains. and has asked neighbors to let us know on the TONA discussion group or by mail (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/thousand_oaks/ or PO Box 7572, Berkeley 94707). (There was a signup sheet at the meeting that drew several names.) A TONA board member will be asked to maintain and update the list and circulate the contact information to block captains periodically.

Lester stressed that block captains need to be able to connect with one another and share information. Claire noted that the city is trying to gather information on organized blocks. As an incentive, it holds an annual competition among blocks to win a bunch of disaster provisions and a shed to store them in. Karen added that Carol Lopes, the city coordinator for Get Ready, Berkeley, hopes to develop a master list of neighborhood captains. But Lester found that the city was lukewarm about sharing the information it has about block captains, perhaps because of privacy concerns.

Blocks could set up an internet site with password access for communication among block members. A site that facilitates this, eBlock (www.eblock.net/), a local equivalent of Yahoo groups, could be used. However, internet access is likely to be unavailable right after a disaster.

(Summary compiled by TONA president Zippie Collins from minutes transcribed by TONA board member Deborah Durant.)