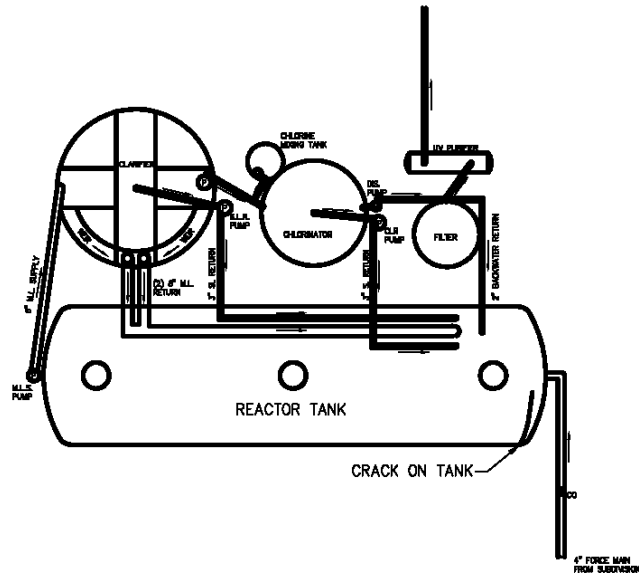


**Emergency Preparedness & Response  
By Valerie Hoff & Tom Fossum, P.E.**

TLA Engineering & Planning, Inc.  
Members, APWA Small Communities/Rural Communities

What is a small community to do when your operators discover sewage all over the floor in the Waste Water Treatment Plant? The Bio-reactor Tank has a large crack that goes halfway around the circumference of the end cap. This fiberglass tank was installed in 1995, at the time of the sewage disaster it was in dire need of attention and there isn't a back-up tank to assist with the sewage treatment. You lack professional staff; there are only volunteer board members and one contracted General Manager. After the clean up begins, the vast conclusion hits you: none of your staff is trained in emergency preparedness. How can you prevent or better respond to this or a dozen other scenarios? This is where emergency preparedness and response becomes the topic for your department's next strategic meeting.



**WHAT RESOURCES CAN MY COMMUNITY UTILIZE?**

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and numerous state Offices of Emergency Services (OES) have taken the spotlight for assistance with emergency preparedness and response. Smaller communities are realizing the importance of relying on these agencies as they create or update their *Emergency Response Plans*. Whether it is for a single incident (like the above scenario) or a multi-hazard event, smaller communities need to create their plan of action and designate who will be responsible for the various duties required during an event.

When you visit the FEMA website ([www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)), there are four key areas to consider: mitigation, preparedness/training, response and recovery. Through your mitigation efforts, your community can reduce the damage and loss of life and property by lessening the impact of disasters. This is accomplished through a risk analysis to determine the full impact of natural hazards using applied multi-hazard engineering science and advanced technology in order to effectively plan to reduce the effects. How will the delivery of electrical services be affected by extreme summer heat? Has your community adopted the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) standards to reduce the damage to communities after a flood? In your risk analysis, have you determined when you will update your building standards to reduce the destruction from an earthquake?

Secondly, your agency can participate in OES and FEMA's training and preparedness education courses. These are designed to educate emergency managers and responders how to perform their duties in the event of an emergency. When disasters of fires, floods,

hurricanes, tornados, and earthquakes hit, the quick and thorough response of your agency can determine how swiftly your community will recover; this starts with a well thought-out and effective response plan.

Finally, as the community rebuilds post-disaster, FEMA and your OES office offers grants and other resources to swiftly restore infrastructure, homes and businesses. The most important aspect of these four steps is knowing the requirements and standards you need to meet in order to be in compliance and eligible for funding.

#### HOW SHOULD MY COMMUNITY TACKLE THIS DAUNTING TASK?

As well-informed Public Works employees, we can utilize our connections to each other through organizations like the American Public Works Association (APWA). The emergency preparedness needs of small and rural communities are an area where we can make a big difference to our communities. The Small Cities/Rural Communities (SCRC) Forum is a working group within APWA that can be used to: network with other communities; find best management practices and successful organization of staff; and brainstorm or run scenarios past others who may have similar populations, geography, weather/climate, economics, etc.

In addition to using resources like the SCRC and APWA, a good idea for a smaller community is to piggy-back off what a larger agency has done. However, they should customize or pare down the plan to meet their individual community needs. As stated above, you can meet with your local OES representative to assist in putting together a plan in order to be compliant with federal, state and regional requirements.

The first step is to perform an initial assessment of the emergencies facing your community and determine what it will take to be compliant with local, state and federal requirements. Secondly, it is important to get “buy-in” and support from local policy makers. These individuals and departments will be your champions for the program’s success.

Once you know the emergencies and natural disasters that will be facing your community, you will have a better understanding of who will be involved in the response. The most labor intensive portion of creating an *Emergency Response Plan* is defining the roles of each department based upon each type of disaster: who will be the lead and who will be the support when an emergency occurs. For example, in a hazardous materials incident, public works and law enforcement would work in tandem to support fire personnel; while in a hostage situation, the police would lead, public works would set up road closures and fire would respond to injuries. In addition to defining the roles, each emergency situation will require equipment and supplies. Who will bring the sand bags? How will the generators be distributed throughout the incorporated areas? How will Public Works mobilize their employees and logistically plan to control traffic so that equipment and supplies make it to their intended destination? What does the Building Department require in order to facilitate evacuations and arrange for emergency shelters? How will the Emergency Response Center coordinate with the mobile/field command centers? All aspects of an emergency should be considered thoroughly.

Lastly, a thorough and complete plan will include a way to communicate and promote your Emergency Preparedness Plan. You will need a public relations plan for internally communicating the plan to the various departments, along with key external community groups, residents and businesses. In addition, consideration needs to be made for the routine training of emergency response staff members. As with all good plans, it is essential to evaluate and

revise your *Emergency Response Plan*. As your community's demographics change, continue to look for ways to improve or streamline procedures and minimize the duplication of efforts.

#### WHEN THE CLEAN UP WORK BEGINS

The opening story was true. The clean up work was only the beginning for this small community. This small community has notified FEMA, County Environmental Health, Regional Water Quality Control Board, and numerous other agencies of the incident in order to obtain assistance with the clean up. This includes the reports and documentation to the regulatory agencies to explain the incident. These agencies will now hold this community accountable to permanently mitigate for this type of disaster in the future. Once the emergency was resolved the agency will be preparing an emergency response plan for their facilities.

The closing thought is that had this small community prepared an emergency response plan, the resolution of the emergency would have been swifter and possibly less expensive. Learn from the old adage, 90% preparation and 10% perspiration. When in the face of a natural disaster or emergency, it is always good to have a response plan.

*TLA Engineering & Planning, Inc. is a land planning and civil engineering firm dedicated to providing a full-range of services to public and private clients. Established in 1985, the firm specializes in planning, permitting, design and managing public and private projects that range from small to large, simple to complex. Experience earned over many years and across all varieties of projects provides the necessary foundation for a wide range of capabilities. Each project is undertaken with an eye toward providing solutions that allow plans and project to proceed smoothly. TLA's extensive experience with regulatory agencies has proven useful to many organizations throughout the Northern California region.*

###