

Report Warns Sonoma County Unprepared for Mass Evacuations

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As Northern California enters what is likely to be a dangerous fire season, **Sonoma County** is unprepared to handle widespread evacuations in the event of a fire or flood, according to a new watchdog report.

Just months after a report by a local nonprofit suggested that the **county's roads could be a "deathtrap" for fleeing residents**, an investigation by the Civil Grand Jury, a branch of the county's judiciary, found that in addition to inadequate evacuation routes, the county's emergency communication strategies and pre-planning information is in need of upgrades that aren't coming soon enough.

"Without accelerated investment in planning, communications, and road improvements — and full compliance with California's legal standards — the risk of chaotic, life-threatening evacuations remains high," the report reads.

By complying with five recommendations to improve those things, the report says, "the county can move closer to being truly ready for the next major evacuation event. And one is coming."

Rob Hunter, one of the authors of the new report, said that Sonoma County's emergency operations and hazard mitigation plans have likely been greatly improved in the last seven years, since Sonoma was hit with four consecutive destructive fire seasons.

But the county has been lucky not to have major incidents in the last three years, since planning for evacuation, shelter, and coordinated communication are in sore need of upgrades, he told KQED.

"Certainly the county has made an investment and the Department of Emergency Management is more able today than it was seven years ago,

but the rest of the report essentially identifies there is additional progress that could and should be made,” he said.

The report found that most of the county’s evacuation routes were incapable of handling the anticipated traffic in an emergency in a timely manner.

Highways 12 and 116, which are key for evacuating from the Sonoma Valley and western Sonoma County, respectively, have intersections that gridlock during heavy traffic, according to the report. Other critical roads along the Russian River are single lane — some of which are also located in spots **vulnerable to mudslides** in flooding events.

The jury also wrote that they were disheartened to learn in interviews with emergency officials that those roads aren’t likely to see significant upgrades in the near future: “The roads are the roads; improving them is expensive, complicated, and, in most cases, requires support from the State of California.”

“Sonoma County’s main evacuation routes have been, and probably will continue to be, bottlenecks for future evacuations,” the report said.

The remnants of Cathy Crowley and Paul Amlin’s home in Santa Rosa after it was burned down in the Tubbs Fire in 2017. *(Courtesy of Cathy Crowley)* While they posed questions about the feasibility of prioritizing such improvements, the jury didn’t go so far as to include major revisions to the roadways in its recommendations. But aside from material improvements, it said that accelerating the county’s timelines to comply with state required planning reports and studies could also make evacuations faster and smoother.

State law requires the county to complete a study identifying the transportation infrastructure that is needed in the county to deliver emergency services, but according to Sonoma’s general plan, it doesn’t expect to begin work on this until 2030. It won’t develop required zoned emergency evacuation plans until the same year.

“In the meantime, should we all just hope there are no emergencies?” the report said.

It recommends that county officials move up work on the study and evacuation plans to 2027, and include funding for the efforts in that year’s budget.

Finally, the report recommends that the county improve its communication system for emergency alerts, which largely relies on access to the internet

During the **Tubbs Fire** in 2017, the only official information source many of the affected residents could access was AM radio, but in many parts of Sonoma County that are remote and rural, cell service is not consistently available. During a power outage, getting any information is difficult.

Local nonprofits and organizations, like General Mobile Radio Service, have stepped in to expand communications networks that rely on radios that don’t rely on cell service or electricity, the report stated, but they haven’t been integrated into the county’s official emergency response as fully as they could be.

“There is not, as far as we know, a commitment to or an agreement among the [necessary] government entities ... to execute county-wide coverage of radio service,” Hunter said. “Given that that’s the only way to actually reach people in the hills north and south of [the town of] Occidental or in the areas north and west of Westside Road, it seems like that’s something that should also be discussed and perhaps moved up on your priorities.”

To remedy this, the jury recommended that the Board of Supervisors direct Sonoma Public Infrastructure to develop a report detailing where more radio repeaters would be needed to expand General Mobile Radio Services countywide, and how much it would cost to install them.

The report also outlines shortcomings in the county’s anticipatory modeling and preparedness for natural disasters, and lack of shelter space for large-scale evacuations.

In the next 90 days, Sonoma County's Board of Supervisors will review the report, and have to decide whether to accept or reject each of its six findings, and implement or dismiss the five recommendations.

Some of the conclusions also require responses from the county sheriff's office, Public Infrastructure Department and Department of Emergency Management.