

From: [Anna Damato](#)
To: [HWREC Exhibits](#)
Cc: PamMarsh@oregonlegislature.gov
Subject: Almeda Wildfire
Date: Monday, February 15, 2021 10:47:12 PM

This is from Mike Thor (mathor@jeffnet.org):

Dear Ms. Marsh,

I was living at 107 Suncrest Rd in Talent the day of the conflagration. I want to relate my experience that day.

I was going about my usual day doing dishes, taking out the trash, showering, going through my internet news feed, and then getting ready to go take care of my beautiful backyard. Comprised of 9 mature rose bushes, 3 plum trees, 2 mature artichoke plants, and dozens of various vegetables before cleaning out the gutters. A little after mid-morning, while taking a break to drink some black tea, I noticed smoke overhead through a skylight in my comforting kitchen. It drew my attention because there was so much of it, and of course, because we were in our worst part of the lengthening fire seasons. So, I went out into my wonderful front yard of two mature trees, six 9' ornamental junipers, many day lilies and wild flower plots. As the smoke only became more ominous and rose higher, I stood there perplexed, I walked down Suncrest towards Clearview Street. When I arrived, there were a couple of other neighbors, who also had come out of their homes, wondering what all of the smoke might mean. I had heard all the fire trucks heading towards Ashland many minutes earlier and assumed there must be a horrible fire there. I shared this with those neighbors in the vein of "it's happening there and can't happen here". Having been around a couple of woodland fires when I was 13 and again at 28 in California I knew that the fire was coming in our direction. As the smoke changed from brown (vegetation) to black (buildings), it blew overhead towards Phoenix. As the wind was intensifying, I quickly went back to my lovingly cared for home of 20 years.

Not just a little fearful after reading about the fires in California that morning, and remembering the Hornbrook-Hilt fires that spread into Oregon, I turned on JPR. There was no alert being broadcast. I turned on the local TV show but it didn't have a banner "Warning" running across the screen. But, I went to pull out the valise safe with important documents, and threw some clothes on the bed with my laptop. I also noticed a line of vehicles going down the street towards the intersection, but only considered it odd for what usually is a low traffic street. I looked at my cell phone. Nothing! My phone remained silent until I got a call from my wife moments later. She works at SOU and the head of campus security had texted her that Talent was being evacuated due to the fire. She called me to let me know, even though there had yet to be any warning from police or fire services in the Autumn Ridge neighborhood. Then, as I was opening the garage door, while taking out my first armful of items, my neighbor came across the side yard telling me that he had heard from his wife, who works in Central Point, that there was an evacuation order. Though he had not heard anything from any of the media connections he has as a media marketing person, he asked for a ride as he didn't have a vehicle. So I gathered up another armload of stuff comprising my wife's clothes and some sentimental photos, then he and I left after he put his 2nd armload of belongings in the car. But not before, he went back to find their cat as the smoke and hot winds intensified.

We drove my loaded small Honda hatchback out to the intersection of Suncrest, Colver and

Old 99. There, the traffic was building up in three directions at the same time. As we waited for a Sheriff's Deputy to direct traffic, I was taken aback by just how many tractor trailers were spread up and down 99. Most astonishing was how many were Prime trucks. These bulky vehicles only added to the traffic jam, which turned the intersection into a parking lot. Before getting to 99, my neighbor received a call that his wife - after getting around several choke points - would meet him at a location off Colver. I dropped him there, then parked at the ballfields to go back to my threatened home. By this time (2pm?), the smoke was hot, the 30 mile per hour winds were heating up, and the traffic jam was getting worse as all vehicles were being directed west out Colver. However, I couldn't see any fire until I got up on my roof to futilely water it down and the surrounding yard. That is until, I heard the first ever announcement of "mandatory evacuation", coming from a loud speaker passing through the Clearview development across the street. I could see some flames by then. Except they seemed to be blowing towards I-5 and may have been jumping the freeway. As I turned the nozzle of my garden hose on spray and tied it off to a vent, I had to duck down below the roof ridge to avoid the 50 mph gusts of ash. And then, I went to get my other hose up on the roof and did the same tie down to give coverage to the top of my home from blowing cinders. By that time the loud speaker order briefly disappeared towards the Willow Springs development, but soon was returning as the vehicle entered Autumn Ridge. The wind had been gusting, so I was ducked down behind a roof ridge when the vehicle passed in front of my home blaring this first - and only - evacuation order, an hour or more after the call from my wife.

As I hauled my 74 y/o body down off the roof, I took notice of the fire burning to the east as it flared up the side of a small hill, which sits right above the Suncrest Rd overpass. I went inside my home into darkness and grabbed as many items as I could - like sentimental photos hanging from walls and albums - throwing them into two grocery bags, and left. Not knowing then that I would never see any of the things I couldn't carry - ever again. Nor my home of 20 years! As helicopters flew overhead, dumping water on the Willow Springs and I-5 area, I reached the intersection again. This time it was definitely a parking lot, and the Prime rigs dominated the congestion. As I crossed the intersection, where brave Sheriff's Deputies and Talent Public Works people were futilely trying to keep the traffic moving, I stopped to look back towards my neighborhood. What I saw only added to my assessment of how hopeless the situation was. The fire had changed direction again and was tearing through a lower orchard igniting trees and blackberry bushes like Roman candles. As the fire rapidly encroached onto the backside of our local fire station, fire personnel were rushing into the surrounding parking lot to successfully fight the fire away from the station. The fast moving fire then jumped 99 north of them and was quickly burning west. I also saw the northeast side of Autumn Ridge's cedar fencing and adjoining trees and bushes ignite. I knew that without anyone there to stop it - and I had yet to see a fire truck on our street - the neighborhood would soon be ashes. Disheartened when I arrived at my car, I called my wife to let her know I was alive - no thanks to a lack of warning - and would be coming to Ashland, if I could navigate the traffic snarls. I did not share my disheartening concerns at the time. But, watched as a borate bomber jet circled to make its run along the north end of Talent parallel to 99, as another couple of helicopters dropped their water. Covering none of the 25+ homes lost in Autumn Ridge!

What I want to know - without the inadequate excuses like "We just didn't know what to expect" - WHY WEREN'T THE POWERS THAT BE PREPARED?!?

First and foremost, why was there no use of EMS warning systems?!? If the decision was entirely Sheriff Sickler's, he should resign or be fired?!? Along with anyone else at the top that was complacent, and complicit, in this catastrophic FUBAR.

Why was there not enough fire personnel?!? The Washington Post and/or the New York

Times articles said "50 trained fire fighters"?!?

Why were there not enough fire fighting planes and helicopters?!? When Jackson Co/Medford made such a big deal a few years back to keep the airport as regional fire support base.

Why wasn't there any preplanning for such a fire conflagration?!? When the Hornbrook-Hilt fire almost totally burned down those towns. And, came over the ridge burning towards the Green Springs and Baldy Creek areas. And, when a 1/3rd of the north side of Redding and all of Paradise burned in similar circumstances of unpreparedness?!?

Why did ODOT let all those trucks continue to go north and south along our traffic congested streets?!?! Obviously, a lack of coordinated communication with EMS!

Someone needs to answer - with their jobs if need be - for the destruction of more than 3,000 homes and businesses, which contain not just "stuff", but irreplaceable valuables. And, to answer for the trauma, ongoing heartache of losses, and unnecessary deaths. As well as, the infuriating aftermath of having to deal with State, County, City, FEMA and insurance company confusion and breakdowns. So that we survivors can recover some portion of our losses, while being put out of our homes for a year, or more. Or, made homeless!!!!

AND WHY? Because our leadership at all levels failed their responsibilities to have a comprehensive SAFETY NET the community can count on!!! Even as Jackson Co. maintains a multi-million dollar slush fund?!?

Candidly Yours,

Mike Thor

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