

LEPC Meeting Minutes
April 11, 2017
12:00 pm First Presbyterian Church Gymnasium

The meeting was called to order by Chris Bell, Director of Morristown-Hamblen EMA. Invocation was given by Perry Davis of Lakeway Hospital.

Director Bell thanked LEPC executive committee, then introduced John Matthews, Sevier County EMA Director.

John Matthews introduced Chief Greg Miller of the Gatlinburg Fire Department who shared a presentation about the events leading up to the fire, the response to the fire, and the aftermath of the fire. Chief Miller explained how their GIS system worked and then began discussing the lead up to the evacuation of Gatlinburg. Miller took a moment to acknowledge those in the room who had come to Gatlinburg to assist with the relief efforts.

Chief Miller explained that the fire storm was a circumstance in which everything came together at the right time to create a once-in-a-lifetime disaster. Everything within their plans failed, and discussed the difficulty of managing such a sudden and intense disaster when all communication and other plans and operations have been taken away due to evacuation or loss from smoke and fire.

He gave a timeline of events, starting with November 28, 2016 when evacuations began. He discussed the Predictive Fire Model, which was used at 4:30 pm and explained that based on their information, they believed they had nineteen hours before the fire would make its way to the city. In reality the fire made it there within 70 minutes.

At this point he introduced Randy Brackens of Gatlinburg Police Department. Chief Brackens explained they had to evacuate the whole town, with boots on the ground going door to door and telling citizens that there was an involuntary evacuation.

Chief Brackens turned the presentation back over to Chief Miller. Chief Miller explained that no one had ever seen anything like this in this area. He explained that at noon on the 28th he requested mutual aid, which had not been done before as a preemptive measure. He shared that a total of 50 counties responded. 225 agencies sent 445 apparatus and that 3,535 individuals responded to the call for aid and helped with the relief efforts.

Chief Miller compared the damage done to the blizzard of 1993. In Gatlinburg during that blizzard, 313 power points were destroyed county-wide due to the blizzard. Comparatively, there were 500 in Gatlinburg alone destroyed from the fires. 85 commercial buildings were destroyed and over 2000 residential homes were destroyed.

Spot fires were seen in Twin Creeks around 11:30. Any other time, Miller explained that normally these spot fires burn uphill. This one burned downhill. It also jumped ridges. By 6 pm, fires were reported within the city. Within an hour, there were over twenty fires. Between 10 pm – 12 am, over fifty fires were confirmed to be burning. Dispatch was flooded with calls. Miller explained however, that only ten percent of the fires were being reported because smoke was so thick it was impossible to see.

At noon schools were evacuated due to smoke. By 6 pm the 80-90 mph winds took out wind detection equipment.

By the evening, fire fighters were trying to fight fires but would become surrounded and would have to run for their lives. Many were covering and hoping for the best.

Chief Miller explained that it is easy to look back and see all the things that could be done differently, but at the time they did the best they could under the circumstances.

He then turned the presentation back over to Director Matthews who spoke of the aftermath of the fires. 17 thousand acres were smoldering after fire. The EOC had to be evacuated to the community center. Numerous agencies including HUD, THDA, Veterans Affairs, Red Cross, and Legal Aid of Tennessee and more all pulled together to help. Donations began to pour in, in what FEMA declared the most organized and well-put-together aftermath efforts of any disaster they'd seen. The old Boyd's Bear Distribution Center was turned into a warehouse for donations, and a volunteer resource center was set up to help volunteers get started. #MountainStrong was started and a website was created to help match up those who needed help with those who could help. 22,000 volunteers gave 220,000 hours which equaled \$4.95 million in donated time.

Aftermath and long-term recovery are now in process. Housing crisis in Gatlinburg (99.1% occupancy) makes it difficult to place families who lost homes. East TN Foundation is helping to subsidize payments on homes/apartments that are higher than market price so families are able to find permanent residency.

Paperwork to FEMA has begun, including damage assessment, debris removal, and financial requests.

At the end of the discussion, Director Bell asked if anyone had any questions. Once questions were answered, he asked each speaker to give one lesson learned from the fire, answers which included: plan for communication to fail and have a plan for what to do when it does, have good relationships with other agencies in county, plan to fail because something will go wrong.

Director Bell asked everyone to fill out the provided survey, and then adjourned the meeting

The Morristown LEPC would like to thank *Arby's, Buddy's Bar-B-Q, and Cookout* for their generous lunch donations.

Our next scheduled meeting to be held on July 11, 2017 with the topic "Cyber Security for Your Organization".