Position Paper on <u>Emergency Communication Systems Systemic Failures</u>

Introduction

We need to **<u>LEARN FROM OUR EMERGENCY SYSTEM FAILURES</u>**, such as the evacuation during the October 16, 2020 "Sign Hill Fire" in South San Francisco.

FACTS

1. **<u>RESIDENTS GIVEN ONLY MINUTES TO EVACUATE</u>**. Due to the fast spreading nature of this specific 4 alarm wildfire, **affected SSF residents were ONLY given minutes to prepare and evacuate** at noon on Friday 16-Oct-2020.

2. **<u>EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS FAILED</u>**. Because REVERSE 911 no longer works on landlines in California (capability for emergency services to robo-dial landlines) and because SMC ALERT has only 20% of the residents signed up, **<u>~80% of an evacuation area's households will NOT get timely orders to evacuate</u>**. Moreover, SSF Fire Department advised that "*Federal emergency broadcast system was NOT used as the fire was so fast running that they did NOT have time*". Note also, during their most recent wildfire, Napa county sent out emergency alert that went out accidentally to all counties EXCEPT Napa (!).

3. **<u>LOCAL CELL TOWER FAILED.</u>** A cellphone tower located in the wildfire area "failed" which further hobbled emergency communications ability to send/receive emergency messages.

4. **<u>LAW ENFORCEMENT "MANUALLY" ALERTED 100+ HOMES</u>**. Our local law enforcement had to physically knock on 130+ household doors to announce the evacuation during a 10-20 minute window. The decision was made NOT to have CERT volunteers get the evacuation order out (no time to mobilize them, and no means to contact them perhaps). Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) are local FEMA-trained volunteers that assist first responders during emergencies such as natural disasters.

5. **<u>IT COULD HAPPEN IN HILLSBOROUGH</u>**. "Local" vegetation fires can force local evacuations. Just in the past 4 weeks, Belmont residents were evacuated, SSF residents also evacuated, and the CZU fire almost jumped the fire break road on the west side of US-280 (albeit 15 miles south we are told).

LESSONS LEARNED FOR HILLSBOROUGH RESIDENTS:

1. **AN EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IS ONLY AS GOOD AS ITS WEAKEST LINK.** The future-planned Zonehaven emergency evacuation system depends upon SMC ALERT to get its evacuation notices sent to residents. If residents rely upon their cellphones to receive SMC ALERT evacuation notices as TEXT messages, that may not happen due to failure of the cellular data system ... the same for emails.

2. **PREPARE TO "BUG OUT" IN ADVANCE**. Many residents had to flee with *no* time to gather personal possessions and valuables, important paperwork, family pets, 24-72 hours water/food/medicines, etc. We understand that the "temporary refugee areas" were at the Terrabay Recreation Center (a.k.a. Municipal Services Building & Social Hall) in SSF. We all need to have our "bug out bags" prepared for family members and pets. CERT members and Red Cross did staff the evacuation center.

3. **MAINTAIN BACK-UP SYSTEMS/COPIES**. Keep mobile devices charged, spare battery charger sticks at hand, etc. Be sure to download PDFs on to your mobile devices and also print the evacuation Zonehaven maps for your neighborhood. Make copies for neighbors if you can (esp. CERT/HNN members). Don't count on power being available during emergency (cell towers fail, PG&E's Public Safety Power Shutoffs occur frequently, and in general you may not be able to get online due to capacity constraints and other issues. Have back-up copies (digital and paper) of important evacuation-related documents.

4. **DON'T EXPECT REVERSE 911 TO BE OF USE.** We each need to take responsibility and sign up instead for SMC ALERT. Reverse 911 is the law requiring landline phone companies to enable law enforcement to automatically contact landlines via robo-calls in times of emergency. Unfortunately, our state legislature passed a law restricting robo-calls such that Reverse 911 no longer works for this purpose.

5. ***IMMEDIATELY* SIGN-UP FOR "SMC ALERT" – SMS TEXT, EMAIL NOTICES & VOICEMAIL FOR CELLPHONES & LANDLINES**. Despite its inadequacies, *every* Hillsborough resident needs to IMMEDIATELY sign up for the San Mateo County emergency alert system (SMC ALERT).

6. **CERT & HNN (HILLSBOROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK) MEMBERS NEED TO BE READY ASSIST.** Our local neighborhood-level emergency teams need to be ready to "knock on doors" during an evacuation scenario if necessary due to lack of SMC ALERT messages getting to our ~4,000 Hillsborough households. We also need to have CERT/HNN somehow "tag" each evacuated building electronically or physically so that law enforcement/first responders can focus on other matters.

Emergency communication systems "systemic failure" is ONE SUCH ISSUE THAT MY CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN FOCUSING ON – specifically, fixing our emergency communication system(s) here in Hillsborough.

For more such issues and my proposals to correct these, see https://www.hillsborough-quality-of-life.com.

RESOURCES

- SF Chronicle news story https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/fire-South-San-Francisco-San-Bruno-Mountain-15653861.php

- LA Times news story https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-10-16/brush-fire-erupts-at-sign-hill-in-south-san-francisco-forcing-evacuations

- Local CBS News video of air drop of fire retardant on burning homes during Sign Hill fire https://twitter.com/i/status/1317197204306632705

- Local NBC News video https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/fire-burns-in-south-san-francisco/2381676/

- Local ABC News video https://abc7news.com/video/embed/?pid=7094729

- SF Chronicle article from last month on "Belmont residents evacuated after vegetation fire threatened https://www.sfchronicle.com/california-wildfires/article/Belmont-residents-evacuated-as-vegetation-fire-15585154.php

- ZONEHAVEN emergency evacuation system – what works, what doesn't? https://nextdoor.com/p/sWZmrGqSX5xw

- Video for Firewise & PG&E Public Safety Power Shutoff presentations to Hillsborough City Council 12-Oct-2020 → https://nextdoor.com/p/_ft8Y4FXCGhk

- Overview of SMC ALERT emergency text/email/voicemail system https://member.everbridge.net/892807736723485/ov

- How to sign up for SMC ALERT https://member.everbridge.net/892807736723485/login

- What should be in your "bug out" bag(s)? https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bug-out_bag

- Overview of REVERSE 911 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverse_9-1-1

- Overview of CERT https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_emergency_response_team