

## **FEMA funds to become available**

*President Obama declares a statewide disaster in the wake of December rains, clearing the way for assistance, reimbursement.*

**Barbara Diamond, Laguna Beach Coastline Pilot, 1-28-11**

Federal purse strings were loosened to Laguna Beach's advantage Wednesday when President Obama issued a declaration that California's December floods constituted a major disaster.

The declaration means public agencies will be able to recover reimbursement for some, if not all, emergency services, as well as repairs or replacement of facilities damaged by the recent storms that devastated Laguna and other communities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will oversee the expenditures, as it did in the 2005 Bluebird Canyon landslide.

"Although very few details are available at this time, I hope to have more information to present to the council and the public at Tuesday's meeting," City Manager John Pietig said.

Pietig said the declaration indicates that Laguna will be able to recoup at least some of the \$1.3 million spent responding to the Dec. 22 disaster.

"This is great news for the city, but we'll continue to do what we can to secure assistance for our residents and businesses," Pietig said. "I want to thank our county, state and federal officials who have worked with the mayor and the City Council to represent the need for assistance in Laguna Beach."

Obama's declaration covers Inyo, Kern, Kings, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Tulare counties, which suffered damage from severe winter storms, flooding and debris and flowing mud Dec. 17 to Jan. 4.

Additional designations may be made at a later date, if requested by the state and warranted by additional damage assessments, according to a FEMA news release.

The news release states that financial assistance for individuals and households is under review. However, no FEMA funds were made available for private parties after the 2005 landslide.

Exactly how much funding the city will get may not be known for sometime. The city only recently received the final FEMA approval for expenditures in the landslide.

Pietig has asked Bluebird Recovery Coordinator Bob Burnham to assist the city with the recovery from its most recent disaster.

The city manager is also looking into FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, which aims to prevent or reduce long-term risk to life and property from natural hazards.

"I am hopeful that that would result in funding to help Laguna address its flooding issues," Pietig said.

The program is financed by 20% of FEMA funds, disbursed by the California Office of Emergency Services, FEMA External Officer Veronica Verde said.

"It is competitive," said she said. "As an example, if a repair to a levee where there are only two homes cost \$1 million, that money probably would go to repair a levee that protected several homes.

"It is designed to reduce damage to public and private property."