

Seattle launches effort to better prepare city for big earthquake

Bryan Johnson, KOMO (Seattle television), 6-11-11

SEATTLE --Next week, the Seattle City Council will launch a three-month discussion on how to better protect citizens from major earthquakes.

Right now, there are some tough realities in the city's plan and what the public needs to know about a disaster preparedness.

Everyone knows Seattle could get clobbered any time with the big one - an earthquake that could wipe out the seawall, flood downtown, topple buildings and cost us billions.

Everyone knows the risk. Most of us have seen the Department of Transportation's animation of what could happen to the Alaskan viaduct and downtown Seattle in a big earthquake.

But real-life images from disaster-stricken areas like Japan put an exclamation point on what we already knew. And video from Christchurch, New Zealand showed the devastating impact of a shallow quake.

That's why Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn on Friday endorsed the city council's Let's Prepare effort, and wants citizens to understand where the city stands.

"If there is an earthquake, it is truly a disaster. There is no precaution you can take in advance that will prevent significant property damage," said McGinn.

The mayor says remember February 2001 when chandeliers swung and parts of old buildings fell. In the big one, a lot more buildings will fall. There will be injuries. There will be deaths. The city will respond.

But in your neighborhood, "the expectation is that it may be three days that an individual, a household, has to provide for themselves," McGinn said.

There is some good news in the city earthquake plan unveiled on Friday. Most fire stations have been made earthquake-safe. Bridges have been retro-fitted. The city has ways to get water from reservoirs to you. And officials have plans to help you get around.

"Create detours and use boat assets, temporary bridging structures in order to help with the earliest of disaster relief and recovery efforts in our area," said Barb Graff of Seattle Emergency Management.

And they are talking about moving to cloud-computing so police, fire and the city don't have to rely on servers.

But there is one major problem: where to put all the displaced people?

"At our last meeting, we discussed this issue. What is our current capacity, with community centers and Seattle Center?" McGinn said. "And the answer is it is not large enough capacity, so I don't have an answer for that."

The city council will look to fill in the gaps in the earthquake plan.

But making more fire stations and police stations earthquake safe, fixing more bridges, taking care of dangerous buildings, cloud-computing, improving the downtown seawall -- all of this costs dollars - lots of dollars.

They may shake your wallet.