

Santa Barbara gets ready for 'The Big One'

Tsunami plan includes signs, sirens, evacuation routes

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Scientists agree that “The Big One,” in California is inevitable.

And when the massive earthquake strikes, many believe that it could lead to a tsunami – a massive tidal wave that could bring destruction to the **South Coast**.

So the city of Santa Barbara and other emergency officials are preparing for a potential tsunami, in hopes of minimizing damage.

“The whole point of this is to know ahead of time and be prepared and know what to do,” said Santa Barbara Mayor Helene Schneider.

In August of 2009 the National Weather Service designated the city “Storm Ready.” To be “Storm Ready”, a community must meet a series of guidelines set by the NWS which include a 24-hour warning system, multiple ways of receiving severe weather warnings, and a developed hazardous weather plan.

Now the city is looking to become “Tsunami Ready.”

The city is considering installing signs in tsunami flood zones, posting evacuation routes and creating sirens that would immediately inform people that a tsunami is on its way.

The areas of the city that are most at risk from a tsunami are south of the 101 to the beach.

There are many factors.

South facing beaches, such as East, West, and Ledbetter, are less at risk from a tsunami from an earthquake west of the U.S. such as the one in Japan. However, they are at greater risk from southern earthquakes, such as the one that struck Chile last year.

“It’s hard for me to imagine that the West Beach area would not be totally inundated,” said Santa Barbara City Councilman Grant House.

An offshore quake would bring very little warning before a tsunami hit.

Santa Barbara experienced a tsunami wave of a little over a foot from the Japan earthquake.

About eight tsunamis, which are caused by earthquakes and underwater landslides, have hit Santa Barbara over the years.

Officials said that the Channel Islands will protect Santa Barbara from a quake on the other side of the islands. But a quake centered between the South Coast and the islands could be disastrous.

“The scariest risk would be an earthquake between here and the Islands,” said councilman Harwood “Bendy” White.

City officials on Tuesday voiced support for using sirens to alert people. Some people expressed opposition to the idea of placing too many tsunami flood zone signs near the waterfront.

“Signage is just not going to make it,” said councilman Frank Hotchkiss. “Sirens have definitely got to be a part of this deal.”

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration through the National Weather Service has developed standards and guidelines aimed at helping coastal communities be better prepared for the impact of tsunamis through focused planning, education and awareness efforts.

The city expects to complete its application to the National Weather Service by the end of the year.