

Tsunami Prep All Wet

Councilmembers Take Public Safety Officials to Task

Nick Welsh, Santa Barbara Independent, 3-31-11

Santa Barbara Fire Chief Andy DiMizio got unusually rough treatment — and open skepticism — from members of the City Council about details of the city's tsunami response plan, still in draft form. Councilmember Grant House, notorious for his appreciations, expressed doubt about a new map showing a much reduced inundation zone should Santa Barbara be hit with a 28-foot tsunami. According to the new map, prepared by geologists with USC, a nine-meter tsunami — roughly 30 feet — would not get much beyond the freeway. Previous maps showed such a tsunami getting much farther inland. DiMizio and Fire Marshal Joe Poire explained that the change reflected a better understanding of past tsunamis and the new technology used in modeling such contingencies. House wasn't buying it. "On its face, it doesn't reflect reality," he said. House said the damage done by the recent 30-foot tsunami in Japan convinced him that the city's new map understates how much real estate would find itself submerged in the event of a tsunami. "Looking at Japan makes me think it's inaccurate."

Councilmember Bendy White was unimpressed with the proposal to post about 30 warning signs throughout the inundation zone. What would happen, he asked, if an earthquake occurred between the Channel Islands — which buffers the shore from waves — and the coast? (He got no clear answer.) In such a case, White suggested the warning time would be substantially reduced. "Then what?" he asked. "Signs?" Fire officials expressed some concern that such signs might become collector's items, prompting Councilmember Michael Self to suggest — in jest — "I'm just saying they could be electrified." White noted that warning sirens play a prominent role in Hawai'i's tsunami response system and asked whether they were part of the local plan. Chief DiMizio said, "Sirens are an option that can be considered." Poire added that sirens were not "mandatory" for Santa Barbara to be designated a "tsunami-ready city" by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Michael Harris, director of the county's Office of Emergency Services, said he hoped that public outreach efforts would educate residents in the inundation zone to stop whatever they're doing in the event of a prolonged earthquake and seek higher ground. But that wasn't good enough for Councilmember Hotchkiss, who insisted that warning sirens "absolutely" had to be part of the plan. "I don't get putting signs down there at all," he said. "I mean, 'Duh!'" Councilmember Randy Rowse said he wanted more details on how the city's police and fire departments would direct traffic from the waterfront across the freeway should a tsunami occur. To make sure they actually work, he suggested they be put to a test immediately after the fireworks on the Fourth of July.