

Mock disaster brings EOC together for training exercise

By Mark Pavilons

King Township experienced a mock disaster Friday morning that saw a mass evacuation of thousands of residents and students from the village of King City. It also closed the municipal office.

A CN freight train carrying toxic chemicals was struck by a tractor trailer early Friday morning, on Dufferin just north of King City. The resulting leak of chlorine forced a mass evacuation and unprecedented emergency response.

King's council chambers were transformed into the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) or 'mission control' for this incident. Despite its true-to-life nature, it was only a mock exercise, part of York Region's Back 2 Basics 2015 Emergency Exercise. Similar scenarios played out across the region, putting first responders, municipal and regional staff into the thick of a large-scale community disaster.

This year's exercise involved The Regional Municipality of York, York Regional Police, Red Cross, York EMS, the Town of East Gwillimbury, Township of King, the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee, CN Rail and GO Transit.

The main goal of the exercise was to practice and strengthen working relationships with community partners in combined community disaster resiliency in the area of response and recovery.

It was all meant to build confidence for those involved, according to King Fire Chief James Wall. Dozens of municipal staffers, firefighters, EMS, and York Regional Police gathered in King's primary EOC command centre to act out the drama and response initiatives.

From onsite cleanup and evacuation of schools and homes, to setting up community shelters, the comprehensive group effort revealed just what's needed during an emergency. And it also showed how people rise to the challenge, and where gaps and deficiencies arise.

'I'm confident we would rise to the challenge and be successful,' said Township CAO Susan Plamondon. She admitted it was a valuable working exercise for staff and even herself.

Declaring an emergency sets in motion a massive protocol, the Community Control Group (CCG) and ultimately the EOC.

While exaggerated, the scenario of a truck hitting tankers is very real, Chief Wall explained. The ultimate purpose of the exercise was not mopping up the spill, but rather coordinating resources for a large-scale evacuation 'a huge challenge.

In the scenario, a tractor trailer hauling five 10,000-pound rolled steel coils collided with a freight train carrying nine residue tank cars. This was reminiscent of the 1979 Mississauga Train Derailment that resulted in the largest (at the time) peacetime evacuation of some 200,000 residents. The CP freight train, carrying poisonous and explosive material derailed in the vicinity of Dundas Street and Mavis Road and exploded into a massive fireball.

Within the first hour of establishing the EOC, people were abuzz, immersed in their response duties. They were given changing scenarios, such as winds, weather patterns and humidity, which saw the plume of chlorine gas move towards King City.

Township Clerk Kathryn Smyth reminded staffers to think ahead and be prepared for every eventuality, especially the worst-case scenario.

Wall mentioned that people tend to think within their occupational 'silos,' but this exercise really forces joint cooperation to protect the public. One thing residents should realize is there's a tremendous behind-the-scenes coordination network when such things occur, along with those vital boots on the ground.

As word spread of the incident, those in the EOC had to contend with road closures, public panic and a media circus.

Constant status updates and reports through a hierarchical chain filled the half-day event.

Afterwards, participants engaged in a healthy discussion and exchange, of where efficiencies, as well as breakdowns, occurred.

Many positive suggestions and recommendations also arose, which King staff will follow up on.

This mock disaster could very well have been real. The public can rest assured that when tragedy strikes, a large network of those committed to serve the public springs into action.