

Recovery: a Local Government response

by Lyn Hayes, Manager Human Services, Shire of Yarra Ranges

The Shire of Yarra Ranges was proclaimed in December 1994 from the amalgamation of the previous shires of Healesville, Lillydale, Sherbrooke and Upper Yarra. It covers some 2700 sq. km and has a population of 137 000. The shire encompasses both urban and rural communities and includes the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges. At the time of the fire the Shire was managed by four Commissioners, with elections for Council due in March 1997.

At the time of the fire my role was that of Manager Human Services which also encompassed that of Recovery Manager.

January 21st 1997 was hot with a gusty north wind. In the Shire of Yarra Ranges offices at Lilydale, we gazed out of the windows, constantly surveying the Dandenong Ranges. The first puff of smoke was visible at around 11.00 a.m. and came from the Montrose area. A second column of smoke appeared relatively quickly and appeared to be in the foothill near Kilsyth and The Basin.

My concerns were twofold. As Recovery Manager it meant putting planning into practice and hoping that the preparations had been sufficient. There was also anxiety on a personal level. My home is in Ferny Creek. At home that day were my two daughters and my 8-week-old grandson.

By 11.30 a.m. phones at the Shire were running hot. Staff who may have been in the fire areas were alerted and emergency plans were put into action. Family Day carers and the child care centre started to call parents to collect children, maternal and child health nurses checked on the well-being of their clients, home carers and meals on wheels volunteers were traced through rosters, as were a myriad of other Shire staff who may have been working in the mountains. Customer services staff were also alerted as calls came in seeking information about road closures, welfare of residents, location of the fires and a range of other services.

The Shire's Emergency Management Plan was activated. The plan had been

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in place for some 18 months following amalgamation of the previous shires and had been tested through minor flooding at Healesville and through desktop exercises.

As Recovery Manager I went to the Emergency Co-ordination Centre at Upwey Secondary College. The Deputy Recovery Manager and other staff went to Montrose to set up the first evacuation centre. By this time there were four fires in the Dandenongs, with the most serious being in Ferny Creek and the Ferntree Gully National Park. Traffic on the road to the Co-ordination Centre was chaotic. The air was thick with smoke and the site and sound of the fires was truly terrifying.

My daughters attempted to evacuate around noon, managing to get to Sassafras township, but were unsure of the safety of the roads off the mountain, as by this stage major roads were closed and minor roads were through forests. They decided to go back home and await further information from me, and eventually evacuated around 7.00p.m as the fire neared our home.

As the afternoon progressed and the fire situation worsened, the Shire established six evacuation centres. This required a significant deployment of staff and many experienced difficulties in getting to the centres. Again, as major roads were closed, staff and the street directory were tested to find access roads that were open. Local knowledge was a valuable commodity. As our resources became stretched our colleagues in the City of Knox opened an evacuation centre at Ferntree Gully. The management of the evacuation centres went reasonably smoothly. Our contact list was up-to-date, but with school holidays and changes in management committee structures, a number of the people we needed to contact were not available.

I established a co-ordination committee at the Shire offices in Lilydale and

this became a critical link in the establishment and maintaining of the evacuation centres. There was urgent need for water, food, medical support, staff, information, transport, animal care, hygiene requirements and more at the evacuation centre, and this committee was pivotal in actioning these requests and alerting me to issues arising. Rosters of staff were prepared for the evacuation centres.

We estimated that we had about 2500 residents in the evacuation centres, with many more sheltering in refuges in the hills or self-evacuating to safer places.

As the night progressed the extent of the damage became evident. At final count 42 homes were razed, 17 homes were partially damaged, many gardens and outbuildings were destroyed, significant parts of the forest were burnt and then there was the finding of three bodies in Ferny Creek. The community at Ferny Creek also experienced the greatest property loss and damage and the greatest dislocation of residents.

One of those killed in the fire, along with her husband and neighbour, was a family day carer for the Shire. This had an enormous impact on staff, and meant that the recovery process needed to focus internally within the organisation as well as externally to the community. It also meant that some staff availability and capacity to participate in the recovery process was affected.

Around 11.00 p.m. as the danger started to recede, planning commenced for the recovery process.

Principles of recovery

The principles of recovery we applied were:

- *Immediate response* — it was recognised that residents would require support and assistance straight away. To facilitate this, two recovery centres, one at Upwey and the other at Montrose, were open for business by 10.00 a.m. on January 22.
- *Qualitative response* — in all the tasks and actions we undertook we wanted to demonstrate care, recognition of the needs and emotions of affected

residents, and respect for their dignity and privacy. We focused on how things were to be done as well as what was to be done.

- *Coordinated response* — we wanted all actions undertaken by the Shire and by other agencies to be organised, co-ordinated and integrated under the auspice of the Shire's Recovery Committee
- *Ownership by the community* — we strongly believed that the community should own the recovery process and should be involved in all decisions affecting their community. Initially the Shire took the lead but, as the communities galvanised into action, they took over responsibility for their recovery.
- *Participation* — we knew the recovery process would be a long and arduous one that would require the participation of a number of key agencies. Strong partnership arrangements emerged between the affected communities, the key agencies (Department of Human Services, Salvation Army and the Shire) and the broader community.
- *Transparent processes* — the Shire was determined that all its actions would be open to scrutiny and would be accountable and transparent.
- *Managed information* — information needed to be timely, accurate and available through a variety of mediums. The Shire activated a media liaison person who was responsible for coordinating responses to the media and to control the information flow. In terms of contacting residents, the role of community networks, local post offices and general stores was extremely successful.
- *Timely outreach* — we anticipated that not all affected residents would access the recovery centres so a planned, timely outreach strategy was formed to reflect community requirements

Recovery centres

The recovery centres were designed as 'one-stop shops' that would offer a range of financial, insurance and legal advice, personal support and material aid. They were staffed by the Department of Human Services, Salvation Army, Department of Social Security, Insurance Council, Law Institute and the Council of Churches. Shire personnel, including youth services, rangers, health officers and building inspectors, were based at the centres and provided services

relating to financial aid and grants, housing and accommodation, personal support, debriefing and counselling, assessment of property damage, disposal of food, safety of water supplies, animal care etc. The centres were open from 6.00 a.m. to around 10.00 p.m. seven days a week.

The Montrose centre was open for a week and Upwey for nearly three weeks. This directly reflected the level of damage within both communities.

The Upwey centre immediately became the focal point for many affected residents and offered them a chance to meet and exchange experiences as well as to seek and offer support to each other. The Salvation Army kept up the tea, coffee and food supplies that offered a welcome respite to many.

There were two major difficulties with the recovery centres. One related to the intrusion of the press into the centres, which was seen as impacting on the right to privacy and dignity of the affected residents. The other involved material aid coming to the centre. The generosity of businesses, the community and individuals cannot be understated or underestimated. Unfortunately we did not have the space to accommodate all of the goods donated and storage became a major issue. There were mixed feelings amongst residents about having material aid so visible and ideally it should have been separate but adjacent to the recovery centre.

Shire Recovery Committee

This was set up the day after the fires and had membership from the combatting agencies and agencies represented in the recovery centres. As the recovery process progressed, membership changed to include community representatives, school personnel, counselling agencies and psychiatric services. Rob Gordon acted as a consultant to the committee and his advice was invaluable. The committee membership was fluid and changed as the recovery progressed.

The role of the Recovery Committee was to control, implement and monitor the recovery process. It was a forum to discuss issues and appropriate responses, to gather and share information with the community representatives and between agencies, to highlight possible areas of conflict or dispute and to devise ways of preventing or defusing them, to share experiences and to give support and acknowledgment and to ensure that the principles of recovery were being followed.

The Recovery Committee had three sub committees — *Material Aid, Counselling and Support* and *Shire Services*. The Material Aid committee was chaired by a Shire Commissioner and had the task of developing principles and a formula for the timely distribution of appeals money (from three different appeal sources) and material aid. We wanted the appeal money to be distributed as quickly as possible and to go to those most in need. A matrix was developed to define loss and need that was reflected in a point score. It is interesting to note that a number of affected residents declined financial support on the basis that others were more needy. Of significance were those residents that were uninsured or under-insured for house and property damage.

The Counselling and Personal Support Sub-committee was shared by a staff member from the Department of Human Services and had the task of co-ordinating all agencies that may have been involved in supporting affected residents. It provided a single point of contact (i.e. a 1800 number) from where residents could be 'triaged' to the most appropriate agency. This eliminated duplication of resources and allowed for the best response to residents. This group also co-ordinated the debriefing for professionals involved in the recovery and provided information on how the community was responding and where the flashpoints might be.

The internal Shire Committee was formed to co-ordinate all of the Shire's activity. Shire personnel were at that time located in six offices and three customer service centres, so effective communication and information exchange was paramount. This coordination meant that information about properties and requirements of residents could be shared and eliminated the number of contacts that residents needed to make to the Shire.

The Recovery Committee at first met daily and also at different periods during the recovery process.

Community Recovery Committees

Ferny Creek residents formed and activated a recovery committee immediately. The Shire, through its Community Development Officer, activated recovery committees for Upwey and Kalorama-Montrose.

The role of these committees involved volunteer co-ordination, accommodation of affected residents (many of whom wanted to stay local so that

children could attend schools etc.), food and meal preparation, practical assistance and social activities. Tasks such as cleaning and furnishing houses, clearing blocks, removal of rubbish, restoring gardens, setting up food banks as well as providing personal support were undertaken with great success. Social activities brought together residents in a united and positive way.

The Shire's Community Development Officer, funded by a DHS grant, supported these committees and acted as an advocate and facilitator in meeting the needs of affected residents.

The Ferny Creek Committee was and continues to be particularly active.

Community participation

In identifying affected communities it was necessary to think very broadly. Those affected by the bushfires were not just those people with homes destroyed or damaged, but also included evacuees, previous victims of bushfires, those who thought it could have been them, relatives and friends of all the above, participants in the response and recovery stages and so on. The affect, and therefore the response, differed in relation to all these groups but it was important to include them all. Outreach and newsletters went to all residents, activities were widely promoted and participation was actively encouraged.

Key community groups, networks and agencies such as schools and pre-schools, services clubs, sporting groups and youth groups all supported families and individuals, whilst horticultural groups offered practical advice about plant and tree damage. The local historical society undertook the recording of the stages of the bushfire and the recovery.

As the fire occurred just before the commencement of a new school year, schools played an integral part of the recovery process. Uniforms and books were replaced, special programs were implemented for those youngsters about to start primary or secondary school for the first time so that school could become an island of normality for the children affected by the fire.

The range of community activities included the Ferny Creek picnic day, the great billy cart race at Ferny Creek Primary School, art show, calendar, CD, and workshops culminating in memorial pathways at a number of sites.

Outreach

This process began with press advertisements about the recovery centres and

progressed to leaflet drops, information in the local newspapers and the commencement of a Shire community newsletter. There were a number of editions of this newsletter that went out on a fortnightly basis and contained factually correct and current information about the recovery process.

An information kit was prepared containing contact numbers for a range of services, information about the fires, the recovery process and how to access support and advice. This was distributed to around 2000 households through a major doorknock campaign, organised through the Council of Churches,

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Department of Human Services and the Shire. Volunteers were marshalled and briefed as to their roles, areas were gridded to ensure no households were overlooked. A green dot on the letterbox signified that the house had been visited. Volunteers were debriefed on their return and reports were compiled indicating whether further visits were required, any issues the householders may have raised and general opinions on the well being of the community.

Community education

This was a major focus of the recovery process and still continues. It included:

- Fire prevention strategies — how to prepare properties and houses, when to evacuate, developing individual emergency plans. The role of the

CFA and Shire in organising neighbourhood meetings and other preparation and prevention strategies has resulted in a growth in knowledge and confidence of residents.

- Concerns in the community about the difference between a refuge and an evacuation centre. Many residents self-evacuated to refuges throughout the hills, some being there for considerable periods of time without water and food. This issue was addressed through a range of forums (meetings, media, leaflets etc.).
- Preparing individual evacuation plans to support the elderly, infirm, disabled and other vulnerable groups on days of high fire danger. Unfortunately some people believed that the Shire or some other agency would come to collect them as the danger approached. Again much work has been done to address this concern.
- The role of Local Government in emergency management (prevention, response and recovery).
- The role of respective agencies in responding to emergency situations.
- Dealing with trauma (included information nights at schools and pre-schools for parents and families with affected children).
- To rebuild or to not rebuild. A number of the houses destroyed were adjacent to the forest and will always be at risk. Much discussion occurred about the advisability of rebuilding and the types of houses and gardens to better suit the environment. Rob Gordon prepared an article about this, which featured in the community newsletter. At this stage—some twelve months after the fire—there are a number of families that have not and will not rebuild. Others have rebuilt houses markedly different from the original.
- Re-establishment of gardens. Gardens and horticulture are very dear to residents and much work and effort was placed by volunteers in clearing damaged gardens and restoring and replanting them, culminating in a huge 'plant-fest' where affected residents were able to access trees, shrubs and bulbs that had been donated. This included trees, that required a crane to move them.
- Need for time-out and the importance of leisure and recreation activities. There were a number of social and fun activities organised throughout the recovery process. Many affected residents made use of

accommodation options donated to the appeal to gain some much needed time out.

- The importance of a return to normal business for agencies, the communities and individuals.

Shire involvement: a total response

There was complete Shire involvement and commitment to the recovery process. Activities undertaken included rubbish removal (fire generates a lot of rubbish), health issues, planning, building inspections, road maintenance and reconstruction, customer services, youth services, tree assessment, block clearing, public relations, stock and animal control and the role of community services and other direct service staff who listened to the stories of their clients.

The Shire undertook to expedite the rebuilding process and organised the clearing of blocks and the fast tracking of building permits. There were co-ordinated visits of health officers, building inspectors and insurance agents to minimise the intrusion for residents and to streamline the responses.

An unexpected outcome was the volume and nature of calls experienced by the customer services and administration staff. Some of these may have started as a simple inquiry about dog registration and then progressed to how the caller had lost their pet in the fire and the subsequent trauma they had experienced. Many staff found it difficult to reconcile the mundane and routine requirements of their jobs with these sorts of calls. They impacted on staff and their ability to cope and should be a major consideration in preparing for future emergency situations.

Surviving

There were a number of keys to surviving the aftermath of the fire. The major one was to manage the process. This involved identifying possible points of contention before they happened or early on, so those cleavages could be avoided or diffused. Some potential cleavages were around unity and equity between recovery committees, community membership of the material aid committee and in delineating the role of agencies.

The importance of information management and exchange cannot be underestimated.

The use of transparent processes, accountability to the community and the commitment to community partici-

pation in every aspect of the recovery process resulted in better outcomes for residents and reinforced the Shire's credibility.

It was also important to support Shire staff. Many were involved in the Compulsory Competitive Tendering process, staffing levels were down due to holidays, and there was a need to juggle the normal commitment to keeping Shire services operational and to being part of the recovery process. All staff were offered group and individual debriefing, counselling and support through the DHS and the Shire's Employee Assistance Program.

Issues

There were a number of conflicting interests and issues to resolve. The Dandenong Ranges is a major tourist destination and many businesses and residents rely on the tourist trade. Residents affected by the fires were angry with sightseers, erecting signs saying tourists go home. As a result the tourist numbers were down. Shire Commissioners addressed the reduction in tourist numbers through the media and encouraged visitors to come to the hills. Those areas affected by the fires had road closure signs and barricades put in place and a satisfactory compromise was reached.

A number of Shire staff were significantly affected by their involvement in the fires. These changes caused some tension between them and those staff who hadn't had the same experiences.

Another source of conflict was the need or desire to remove trees and clear properties while acknowledging that conservation of the environment was a factor in why many residents choose to live in the hills. A solution was found by using arborists to assess any vegetation residents desired to remove for potential safety or fire risk.

There was a need for scapegoats. People were angry that the fires occurred and need to find someone to blame. The Shire received negative publicity for being behind in its grass-slashing program, which took focus off the main game. The fact that the fires were deliberately lit increased the anger.

Managing the volume of material aid donated and ensuring that goods were fairly and equitably donated caused headaches. The Salvation Army was superb in the way they responded and many volunteers and members of service groups rallied round to sort and store the goods.

Relationships with the media developed into a positive experience, and in future planning there is a need to have closer liaison with the media earlier so that all needs are met i.e. the media for stories, agencies for accurate information dissemination, residents to receive appropriate coverage and assistance.

What I learnt

There was a depth of feelings generated in others and myself. Emotions were heightened and needed to be recognised and validated. I don't think it is an overstatement to say some of us had our lives changed through our involvement in the recovery process.

There was an overwhelming generosity. People donated wedding rings to replace those lost, children with new Christmas toys gave them to children who had lost theirs. Expressions of love, sympathy, understanding and support, and memories of these people and their contributions will stay with me forever.

There was power and strength in the community, individuals and agency networks.

The first signs of regeneration in the forest were a cause of great jubilation. It emphasised the cycle of life, growth and rebirth. Although the forest, individuals and the community will grow and continue, they have changed forever. Our challenge is to grow through it.

At the time of the fire Lyn was Manager Human Services at the Shire of Yarra Ranges, with responsibility for Recovery Management.

Lyn has lived at Ferny Creek for 14 years and as a result has personal and professional experience of the bushfires in the area.

Lyn has a background in teaching and social work, as a primary teacher and as a social worker in the School Support Service. Following this she moved to Local Government, where she was Manager Community Services for the Shire of Healesville before her position at the Shire of Yarra Ranges following amalgamation.

She has a strong commitment to community development and empowerment, and believes that any involvement with the community or individuals must be holistic, systemic, co-ordinated and integrated.

It is important to note that her involvement in the recovery process as Recovery Manager ceased on March 23 1997 when she left the Shire to take up a position with the Department of Human Services in Traralgon.