Achievements of the neighborhood association after 1991 Eastbay fire and their sustainability

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Abstract – Recent disasters have increased awareness of the importance and need for adequate disaster preparedness and recovery. Post-disaster recovery research has primarily focused on the rebuilding of individual households and businesses or infrastructure. However, the intermediate layer of neighborhoods and the roles they serve in the recovery and the preparedness processes are often overlooked. This paper discusses how people and neighborhoods - North Hills Phoenix Association (NHPA), established soon after the 1991 fire - have been involved in post disaster rebuilding and disaster preparedness. Their roles and activities have shifted over time, from post-disaster reconstruction of neighborhoods to improvements to neighborhood planning, landscape, and safety. Their continuing efforts in community-based disaster preparedness are necessary in order to reduce future chances of disaster.

Keywords – Neighbourhood association, community participation in reconstruction, 1991 Eastbay Fire

1. Introduction

Recent occurrences of large disasters have focused attention on the importance and need for disaster preparedness. However, the intermediate layer of neighborhoods and the roles they serve in the recovery and the preparedness processes are often overlooked. Oakland and Berkeley, California is located on the opposite shore of San Francisco, having population of one million people. This area has experienced many wildland and urban interface fires (defined as areas where homes are built near or among lands prone to wildland fire), but the houses were rebuild and community was recovered. Several books and reports discussed details of operation by fire department, and issues and problems of existed environment that caused fire. However, the process of recovery and reconstruction of community effort is limited.

This case study explains the power of people during the rebuilding their houses and their neighborhood community. This study focuses on analyzing the neighborhoods association called North Hill Phoenix Association (NHPA) established soon after the Oakland-Berkeley Fire or so called “Eastbay fire” in 1991. The focus of this paper are: 1) how residents and NHPA overcome the difficulties, 2) how issues and problems have been changed over the years and how NHPA adopted to those changes. This study was conducted based on a literature review of existing documents and newspaper articles, as well as a website search, to collect data regarding the 1991 fire. One source is the neighborhood-based North Hills Phoenix Association (NHPA), which began issuing a newsletter three months after the 1991 fire that continues to this day. To date, there have been a total of 73 issues comprising 497 pages (North Hills Phoenix Association News, 1992-2014). In addition, several interviews were conducted with a former president of neighborhood association, an architect of neighborhood planning, a leader of a community-based group. The interviews were conducted from June 2013 to July 2014.

2. Outline of Eastbay Fire in 1991

On the morning of October 20, 1991, a devastating fire occurred in the Oakland and Berkeley hills. The fire, occurring at a major wildland-urban interface, resulted in 25 deaths and 150 injuries, and destroyed about 3,354 single-family houses and 456 apartment units. It was estimated to have caused $1.5 billion in damage (FEMA, 1992). This was one of the worst fires in California history, and at that time was the third most costly urban fire disaster in U.S. history. Fig. 1 shows the study area and fire affected/burned area in 1991.
A direct cause of the fire was the strong wind that rekindled a grass fire from the previous day. Many additional conditions are considered as contributing causes of the fire, for example: the five-year drought; high temperatures with low humidity and a strong Diablo wind on that day; the highly combustible eucalyptus and Monterey pine trees planted in that area; untreated wood shingles used as roofing and siding materials for houses, and wood decks extending out from houses on the hills; narrow winding roads which limited access for the fire trucks; an inadequate water hydrant system and power cuts to the pumping stations; and an inappropriate response of the fire department.

The area suffered from major fires in 1923, 1970, and 1991. Large fires seem to occur historically every 10 to 20 years. After those fires, several studies were conducted to examine the issues and make recommendations; however, many important improvements to the fire safety of the area remained unaddressed and unsolved. Despite the risks, homes were rebuilt and the community recovered. Based on these conditions, the East Bay continues to be prone to disaster and must prepare for possible future disasters.

3. North Hills Phoenix Association

3.1. Outline of the organization and its achievements

The North Hills Phoenix Association (NHPA) was established soon after the fire by some members in the same neighborhood who felt the need to get together, share information, and reach their local government. The geographic area encompassed by the NHPA includes the north Oakland Hills and a part of Berkeley adjacent to the Oakland boundary. This area includes about 1,500 households. The NHPA was established for the purposes of: advocating with the Cities and other governmental bodies; collecting and sharing information related to rebuilding and creating a safe and ecologically healthy environment in the North Hills. During the rebuilding and reconstruction stage, NHPA’s greatest contribution included organizing the disaster victims/survivors to insure their involvement; gathering and sharing information by chairing many public meetings; submitting suggestions and requests to the local government; and leading efforts to place several projects to secure the safety of the area. The NHPA’s roles and activities have shifted over time from a focus on the post-disaster reconstruction of the neighborhood to an emphasis on improving neighborhood planning, landscape, and safety. The present investigation followed this shift by examining the headlines of NHPA newsletters from all previous volumes and issues. The topics were divided into five-year periods from 1992 to 2014.

3.2. Issues raised overtime

As Table 1 shows, in the first five years after the fire, the major topics were related to rebuilding the houses and neighborhoods. Among many, the following issues were the most reported and received the most attention: leading the fight for the undergrounding of utilities; representing homeowners in hearings with the Insurance Commissioner; performing a prominent role in the ongoing formulation of new zoning and preservation regulations; ensuring that foundation removals proceed as mandated and working on projects related to building codes, and parking restrictions; and planning and hosting emergency preparedness-related facilities and activities like building the North Oakland Hills Fire Station. In addition, their activities included citizen involvement and input into the City’s redevelopment planning, lobbying on both the federal and state level for tax relief, and providing input for improved vegetation management.

Six to ten years after the fire, NHPA’s activities continued in rebuilding but also began to address new issues. Major issues during this period were: ensuring the City’s commitment to proceeding with several projects, such as repaving, construction of the new fire station, vegetation management, etc.; working on drainage management, preparing landslide/erosion lists, and presenting information to City offices for appropriate action; and ensuring that new development meets development criteria. The NHPA organized community gatherings such as potluck parties to welcome new neighbors and strengthen community ties. After 11 to 15 years, many of the suggested ideas were realized. There are now established communication networks through a website (Open forum) and the Phoenix Emergency Notification System (PENS) (neighborhood radio network). A wildfire prevention district contributes to mitigate potential fire hazards.

In 2010, NHPA changed its name to the North Hills Community Association (NHCA), and its bylaws were updated to meet current conditions and needs. Most recently (16 to 23 years after the fire), now, the NHCA has focused on creating a neighborhood watch group, joining Oakland’s neighborhood crime prevention council. By this time much of the neighborhood has changed, therefore, the association is encouraging new neighbors to participate in the NHCA. Figure 2 shows the timeline of NHPA development and the major issues over the course of this development.


4. Conclusions

The NHPA takes a lead role in organizing community members to achieve their goals. Through different activities over the years, NHPA has accomplished the following: (1) networking among residents and with City government officials, (2) accumulating knowledge and experience in several subjects as well as human resources, and (3) establishing a co-working and trust-based relationship with the City and other governmental and non-governmental organizations. Neighborhood groups are more likely to know about local residents who need assistance and are able to assist at the time of disaster as well as ordinary times. Also, they are more aware and knowledgeable of geographical considerations, problem locations, or personnel who are knowledgeable of relevant subjects. Their voluntary spirits to improve their neighborhoods deserves the most consideration. This case study demonstrates the power of people and neighborhoods in many ways, including neighborhood groups to share in the responsibility for disaster preparedness and reconstruction. Continuing efforts with emergency organizations are necessary in order to reduce the chances of disaster and mitigate the ensuing damage that will inevitably arise in the future. Neighborhoods need to be continuously involved to maintain awareness and to prepare for the worst scenarios.

References


Citation