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## Supervisor questions disaster readiness

By Rebecca Rosen Lum CONTRA COSTA TIMES

A Contra Costa supervisor called Tuesday for a probe of the county's capacity to protect its residents from an earthquake, flood or chemical release.

After administrators told supervisors Tuesday that the county is well prepared, Supervisor John Gioia said he wasn't buying it.

"New Orleans had a plan," said the supervisor from Richmond. "It wasn't implemented."

With a half-million people living along a 30-mile stretch of the Hayward fault and the 40 Delta levees in fragile shape, "we've got to get our act together," he said.

Gioia's contention is borne out by a UC Davis study that says chances are strong an earthquake or a flood could rip through the area by 2050.

But since the Army Corps of Engineers budget has been slashed, any plan without dollars can only provide a false sense of security, said Public Employees Union Local No. 1 attorney Rollie Katz.

"We need to connect the dots and let people know these things cost money," he said. "If people want these things, they have to pay taxes."

The concern is if the levees crumble, salty Bay water would rush into the Delta, rendering the water undrinkable. That's what happened last year when the Jones Tract levee gave way.

"Jones Tract is not an isolated circumstance," said Supervisor Mary Piepho of Discovery Bay.

The effects could extend far beyond Contra Costa County: Two-thirds of the state's population relies on the Delta for drinking water.

Yet resources for the state's levee improvement program are ebbing. The plan called for expenditures of \$450 million from 2000 to 2007. It has received \$108 million to date.

Earthquakes are a bigger risk for West Contra Costans, another supervisor said.

Many there lack the means to get out of town fast should a catastrophe strike, said the resolution's co-sponsor, Supervisor Federal Glover of Pittsburg .

"Part of the planning has to include people who have no way to evacuate," he said. "Many folks (in Louisiana) did not remain because of stubbornness. They did not have the means to leave."

The resolution, which passed unanimously, also proposes to speed aid to victims of Hurricane Katrina -- both in the Gulf Coast and in the county. Some 50 families have relocated here, joining relatives in Richmond and Antioch.

"The most pressing issue is long-term housing," said County Administrator John Sweeten. "What we don't have is the resources to pay for that. We have a waiting list of 3,500 for Section 8 housing, and we've been confronted with a reduction" in federal funds.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency pays for motel stays of up to five days only, "and that's not enough," said county Crisis Center homeless service manager Minerva Blain.

"Emergency services are going to fade away, and many families are going to be living here," said Benita Harris of the Contra Costa County Continuum of Care board. "They need trauma counseling. They need grief counseling. They need it clearly delineated how to go about accessing benefits."

Recent arrivals include a group of 35 women -- "people who had jobs and now have nothing," some with infants -- who called her throughout their odyssey from Louisiana through Texas.

At Piepho's request, the investigation will include animal rescue, a pertinent consideration, she said, with stables throughout the county.

Gioia asked for a report within three months. But he rejected an offer for a presentation by the county's Office of Emergency Services. Instead, all the players, including water and sanitary districts, must help chart an action plan, he said.

"Whether we're talking about the Loma Prieta earthquake or the Oakland Hills fire, there were always plans on a shelf," he said.

"There was a plan in New Orleans saying residents should evacuate. Did that happen? No."