

CITY OF LOS ANGELES

SYLMAR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

PRESIDENT: Quyen Vo-Ramirez
VICE-PRESIDENTS: Tammy Flores and Rick Donnelly
TREASURER: Randall Kelly
PUBLIC RELATIONS: Nick Krall



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Minutes of the
**SYLMAR NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL (SNC) SPECIAL BOARD and
L.A. CITY COUNCIL EDUCATION & NEIGHBORHOODS
JOINT COMMITTEE HEARING
Tuesday, November 25, 2008**
at Los Angeles Mission College, 13356 Eldridge Avenue, Sylmar, CA

Call to Order

L.A. City District Seven Councilman Richard Alarcon (818-756-8409; www.lacity.org/council/cd7) called the Hearing to order at 3:16 p.m.

All five SNC Executive Board Members (President Quyen Vo-Ramirez, V.P. Administration Tammy Flores, V.P. Communications Rick Donnelly, Treasurer Randall Kelly, and Public Relations Director Nick Krall) and other SNC Board Members, including Erlin Arellano, Hiral Bhakta, Hector Cabrera, Fabian Garcia, Jim Schopper, and Esteban Tavares, were present at the beginning of the Meeting, as were Councilman Alarcon and various City, State and Federal officials. Also attending were approximately 250 Stakeholders and Guests. Various fire victim assistance flyers were available near the entrance.

1. Opening Remarks [re: Council File No. 08-3144]

Committee Chair, and Sylmar Neighborhood Council Executive Board Members
Councilman Alarcon introduced Judith Valles, Mission College President, who welcomed everyone. The Councilman thanked the SNC for attending, noting that this is the “first time a City Council Meeting is being held with a Neighborhood Council.” He introduced Ms. Vo-Ramirez, who thanked the Councilman for the opportunity and for “setting a precedent for Neighborhood Councils to be working with the City Council” by having this Meeting. She described the fast establishment of the Evacuation Center at Sylmar Recreation Center; evacuees began arriving soon after the [Sayre] fire started soon after 11:00 p.m. on November 14th. She thanked the many volunteers, including youth, who responded and worked tirelessly and never complained. The Sylmar Neighborhood Council has a website (www.sylmarnc.org) and (General Board) Meeting every fourth Thursday of each month. She also thanked the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) for their work. She noted that the Sylmar Women’s Club, which raises thousands of dollars each year for youth and scholarships, is now homeless.

Councilman Alarcon introduced Erika Pulst, L.A. City Legislative Assistant (213-978-1071; erika.pulst@lacity.org); Darryl Powell of the L.A. Chief Legislative Analyst Office (213-473-5728; Gwen Poindexter, Deputy City Attorney, Neighborhood Council Advice Division (213-978-8100; www.lacity.org/atty); and Jose Sigala of the City Education and Neighborhoods Committee (213-847-7777; Jose.Sigala@lacity.org). The Councilman wants “to set the tone of the recovery process . . . and be more safe.” A “Resource Information Sheet” and a Press Release/“Assistance Application Form” were available, and he announced that the Lopez Canyon Advisory Committee fund has “set aside \$100,000 for victims of the Marek and Sayre Fires” for victim assistance, but not for housing.

2. The Los Angeles Fire Department and the Los Angeles Police Department will provide a description of the [November 14-20] Sayre Fire and their respective roles in the emergency.

LAFD Deputy Chief Mario Rueda reported that on November 14, shortly after 10:00 p.m., the FD declared “Red Flag” fire conditions and put citywide resources “on alert.” At approximately 10:30 p.m., flames were observed near “Veterans Park . . . moving at a very rapid pace . . . conditions were surreal . . . people were evacuating on their own . . . visibility was down to 10 – 15 feet in the middle of the smoke . . . people were running down the street . . . He’s never seen anything like it in [his] 30 years in the Department.” At first, the FD was “strictly defensive . . . [there wasn’t any opportunity for] offensive tactics . . . wind gusts [were] up to 78 miles per hour. Ember storms . . . were spotting up to one-half mile ahead of the fire. Ornamental vegetation ignited . . . and caused structure fires.” Some resources had “already been deployed to the Santa Barbara [fire] event.” L.A. County and Angeles National Forest FD’s also sent fire engines. “[FD] pilots were pushed by the wind . . . in violent conditions . . . neonatal patients were evacuated” from Olive View Medical Center . . . [staff] were working by flashlight . . . Firefighters worked for an hour at Oakridge Mobile Home Park (OMHP) knocking on doors to make sure everyone got out.” Water pressure may have been low because many water sources were open at the same time . . . [The FD] is working with the DWP (L.A. Department of Water and Power) to investigate this. Firefighters had to be pulled out until the main fire swept through. “OMHP is served by an eight-inch water main . . . Firefighters experienced drops in water pressure . . . A variety of things could’ve caused that . . . there’s no evidence at this point that any of the drop in water pressure was due to human action.”

Councilman Alarcon noted that “fire hoses were melted onto the sidewalk . . . which means that someone was standing there until the very last moment.” [Sustained standing ovation from the audience.] Chief Rueda said that the LAFD “will look into” continuing to coordinate with the LAPD for future evacuations. There will be an internal report in 45 days regarding resource deployment and fire prevention efforts. The LAFD set up the “Brush Clearance Program . . . to educate the public.” Councilman Alarcon explained that mobile home parks are regulated by the State.

LAFD Acting Fire Marshall Craig Fry announced that they are “creating a Task Force” with other agencies “to look at mobile home park . . . construction, spacing and density . . . to prevent major conflagrations.” Chief Rueda expressed that the LAFD “deployed 110 fire engines” (in addition to other agencies’). At the beginning of the fire, “additional resources were six to seven hours out” and they knew that most of the damage would already be done before those resources could arrive. A team is working on re-seeding and re-foresting fire-damaged areas.

Councilman Alarcon observed that “The Neighborhood Council was the first neighborhood group to respond (to the fire), including (Ms.) Flores.” Chief Rueda added that CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) volunteers also responded quickly, and worked “very long hours . . . Thanks for their work.” Chief Fry expressed that this was “truly a community that was taking care of a community . . . neighbors taking care of neighbors,” and that he is “very proud . . . It truly set the example for the entire world.” Councilman Alarcon related that the three Chiefs physically carried one woman to safety “as the windows were blowing out.”

Mr. Krall pointed out that the “Sylmar High School Evacuation Center opened for [October 12-16] Marek Fire evacuees in about three hours . . . for [the Sayre] Fire, it took less than one hour . . . within one hour, we had 300 volunteers.” Ms. Vo-Ramirez asked why foothill communities do not have “do not plant” lists and recommendations in the Community Plans, and noted that Caltrans uses highly flammable vegetation along freeways. Chief Fry acknowledged that the “Brush Clearance Program . . . is [his] responsibility . . . This year, for the first time, [the FD] will go door-to-door (to educate homeowners).” Mr. Donnelly said he’s “looking forward to a good report” that will “be a model for other communities.” Ms. Flores announced that “the Sylmar Neighborhood Council is developing an evacuation plan” and wants to partner with [the FD]. Chief Fry responded that [the FD] “absolutely” wants to partner with the Neighborhood Council . . . [They] will look at ingress and egress” issues (at OMHP).

LAPD Deputy Chief Michael Moore thanked Councilman Alarcon and the Sylmar Neighborhood Council, and described PD activities. The PD’s “main responsibilities are evacuation and coordination with [many agencies] . . . Many [L.A. City] Department of Transportation Officers were standing at intersections . . . under dangerous conditions . . . their assistance was invaluable.” The PD declared “a Citywide Tactical Alert . . . to hold resources” and that the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department, the California Highway Patrol, L.A. Unified School District Police, and “virtually the entire City of San Fernando Police Department” also assisted . . . “At the height of the event, there were approximately 250 law enforcement personnel” on duty . . . “The Highway Patrol and Caltrans” directed traffic away from and were “shutting down” the 210 and 5 Freeways so that people didn’t “drive into a firestorm . . . School Police assisted with Evacuation Centers . . . partner agencies really opened the checkbook” to help this community. Four Evacuation Centers were opened and the PD was “really happy to see how fast the Neighborhood Council opened Evacuation Centers . . . and we really appreciate it.” “Ten thousand

residents were evacuated, many on their own initiation . . . this could not have been accomplished by going door-to-door . . . We rely upon the community to assist us and alert their own neighbors . . . The spontaneity of the Neighborhood Councils [in the San Fernando Valley shows it] is one of the best-prepared and best-responding communities in Southern California . . . The resiliency of the preparedness played a vital role in the successes.” “Five people were arrested in the Mobile Home Park area last Saturday for being there for, possibly, looting . . . The Police Department’s presence helped prevent additional such acts.” The PD “searched well over 600 residences in the OMHP from Saturday mid-day to Sunday afternoon . . . with some searched two to three times . . . by Urban Search and Rescue Teams [made up of] L.A. County and Venture County Sheriff Department [and other agencies’ personnel].” They “began . . . on Monday to organize more than 500 burned-out residents to visit the OMHP to recover items and visit the site.” Utility teams worked “to render electric utilities safe . . . The residents of OMHP are courageous . . . and inspirational and are to be applauded for their resolve.” “Security continues on the site” and the PD is “working with the FD [regarding the] debris flows and the effects of tonight’s rainstorm . . .” and what type of hazardous conditions we might see . . . and mitigate potential dangers.” The PD “will complete an after-action report . . . The emergency closure of the 5 and 210 Freeways had a significant impact on our ability to bring resources into the area . . . and did delay our resources for one or two hours in some areas.” He described plans to facilitate resource deployment and mitigate such challenges in the future. The PD needs and Chief Bratton is working on acquiring special equipment (such as breathing masks and other protective equipment) “for officers in hot zones,” and they “need another channel to connect evacuation plans . . . such as a reverse 911 telephone system . . . The success of [our efforts] was due to the multitude of volunteers . . . Fifty-one PD Reserve Officers came to work . . . The leadership of the [Sylmar] Neighborhood Council [helped them a lot] . . . You enjoy great leadership at this Neighborhood Council.” Chief Moore explained “Advisory” and “Ordered” evacuations and that, if people don’t evacuate, the PD tells them that they “are there at their own peril . . . and that they may die if they stay there.” The PD “will work with the Red Cross” (and other agencies) regarding sexual predators and other criminals being in the evacuation area and centers. “[Fire evacuation efforts] are managed chaos. These events mature by the minute.” Evacuation centers “were being set up , , , at the same time we were telling people to flee the fire.” “Points of information . . . can get out of sync with one another . . . Putting information out ahead of . . . the existing assistance structure . . . can hamper” assistance efforts.

3. The Victims of the Sayre Fire will provide testimony on the various services and aid available to them.

Councilman Alarcon noted that the following officials were present and available to assist people: Karma Hackney of the State Office of Emergency Services (916-845-8141); Jim Dantona, Planning Deputy for L.A. City District Two Councilwoman Wendy Greuel (213-473-7002; jim.dantona@lacity.org; www.cityplanning.lacity.org); Frances Alvarez, FEMA Individual Assistance Deputy Branch Chief; Antonio Sanchez, East Valley Area Director of Neighborhood and Community Services for

Mayor Villaraigosa (818-778-4990; antonio.sanchez@lacity.org); and Angel Barnuevo, Field Deputy for State 20th District Senator Alex Padilla (818-901-5588; angel.barnuevo@sen.ca.gov).

Stakeholder Danny Rios testified that he was “disappointed that some Police Officers didn’t help evacuate residents,” asked “why water trucks were outside the OMHP instead of inside,” and needs a place to live. Councilman Alarcon referred Mr. Rios and other fire victims to Maggie Estrada, Field Deputy, at his Office at (818) 756-8409, for forms and programs assistance. Stakeholder Wesley Lyons is concerned about “the [OMH] Park not having enough water pressure.” He “saw a lot of people with hoses and sprinklers trying to water their places down,” and some people who weren’t home “had left their sprinklers on.” He asked whether “separate water lines will be put in” that wouldn’t be affected by such uses.

Stakeholders Jolene Merriam and Jean Barry didn’t feel helped by their insurance companies, and Ms. Barry would like to know the OMHP management’s intentions. Councilman Alarcon offered to work with the State Insurance Commissioner to set up a meeting with the fire victims and referred people to Dan Rosales, Jr., Planning Deputy for Councilman Alarcon (818-756-8409; dan.rosales@lacity.org; www.cityplanning.lacity.org), regarding insurance company responses. The Neighborhood Council will help write that letter to the Commissioner. The Councilman noted that “124 [OMHP] homes are still standing, but the residents aren’t being allowed back in (due to hazardous conditions),” adding “Feel free to write your concerns down” and submit them to his Office.

Stakeholder Wanda Whelan of Sky Terrace MHP “would like to be included in” efforts to assist Sayre Fire victims. Councilman Alarcon responded that “Sky Terrace . . . is under the jurisdiction of the County” and referred to County Supervisor Mike Antonovich’s Office. Stakeholder Perry Mazello noted that because “many [OMHP] residents don’t hear well, it would’ve helped if the Police Officers had turned their sirens on,” and he’d like the City to “clear the property, so the tenants don’t have to pay for it.” He added that a local apartment complex is “conducting auctions” for apartments “to go to the highest bidder.” Councilman Alarcon responded, “That’s an issue of gouging . . . if there’s anything we can do to stop it, we will.”

Stakeholder Hippolito Ramirez would like the [Governor’s] Disaster [Area] Declaration to include the [October 13-18] Sesnon fire victims. Councilman Alarcon pointed out that the decision “to limit” the Disaster Declaration “was a decision of the Governor’s Office.” Ms. Hackney explained that the Marek and Sesnon Fires assistance requests were processed through the Individual Assistance Officer of the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, for homeowners, renters and businesses to apply for low-interest loans . . . and waive the [application] fees and have documents . . . in place . . . The problem is the difference in the time . . . between the two [Sesnon Fire and Sayre Fire] events . . . The State and Federal governments are bound by the regulations as to what can be requested . . . If an assistance is rejected, it’s often referred to volunteer organizations . . . Eligibility . . .

is up to the agency . . . A “Supplemental Grant Program” is also available for people whose needs aren’t met by FEMA . . . up to \$10,000.”

Stakeholder Glenn Bell observed that “most mobile home parks in Los Angeles do not have fire hydrants and no evacuation plans . . . and most residents are senior citizens who don’t qualify for low-interest loans . . .” He asked why they were evacuated into another mobile home park that was also being evacuated. Stakeholder Katrina expressed that it was hard to hear the Officers’ loudspeaker instructions and that “St. Didicus Church has been very helpful.”

Councilman Alarcon remarked that “numerous agencies [are assisting and] the Neighborhood Council is coordinating with” [them]. Ms. Vo-Ramirez encouraged fire victims to provide information needed to help them, adding that many “businesses are helping.” Stakeholder Jody Jepson commented that it would help if the OMHP management would set up a website to make information available and if more housing is available, especially that would waive fees and lower their rent.

Mr. Krall announced that “some community agencies met last night . . . to form the nucleus of the Long-Term Recovery Committee . . . [More services will be available] . . . Check the Neighborhood Council website . . . www.sylmarnc.org . . . stick together and, as much as you can, be patient.” Stakeholder Scott Freeman is concerned about a nearby “tire recycling business” and other “environmental issues.” Councilman Alarcon referred to Michael Tou of U.S. 27th District of California Congressman Brad Sherman (818-501-9200; <http://www.house.gov/sherman>).

Stakeholder Ellie Brooks is concerned that the “reverse 911 [issue] . . . is a dead deal . . . [We] need more agencies to coordinate it.” Stakeholder Arnie Robles thanked Manager Jennie Harmon and encouraged residents to move forward. Stakeholder Professor Charles Dirks observed that many students have been “absent because of the Fire.” Stakeholder Linda Orlick is concerned that emergency insurance money needs to be designated for rent, not only for other things. Stakeholder Steve Fisher is concerned about how to get insurance if an insurance company won’t provide it. A Stakeholder is concerned about the media handling individuals’ belongings without permission and why residents had to wait so long to re-enter OMHP.

4. The [City] Emergency Management Department and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will provide an update and information on the current status of victim assistance and services.

James Featherstone, General Manager, L.A. City Emergency Preparedness Department (EPD) (213-978-2222; www.lacity.org/emd), testified that the EPD was notified just after 11:00 p.m. [on November 14th] about the Sayre Fire and the EPD “was in constant communications with around 60” other agencies. They declared a “Level three” fire . . . the “highest” level.” They’ve been having many meetings, including by teleconference, with many agencies to prepare for possible rain, flooding, mudslide, etc. damage. He recommends “sandbagging . . . and K-rails

(concrete temporary barriers) to protect properties . . . Key thoroughfares” may be “shut down.”

Frances Alvarez, FEMA Individual Assistance Officer, said that assistance will be available “as soon as [she] can” [make it available]. Councilman Alarcon responded, “That is not acceptable. When can we have the assistance available?” “FEMA Disaster Aid” and “Disaster Assistance” flyers were available (800-621-FEMA (3362); www.fema.gov).

[At this time, a fire alarm sounded that was determined to be a false alarm.]

Veronica Verde, FEMA Community Relations Officer (veronica.verde@dhs.gov; 505-747-4202, cell 505-934-9728), stated that burn areas are being assessed and encouraged people to apply . . . at the assistance center and online . . . even if they have insurance . . . FEMA can assist with [a grant, not a loan, for expenses] over and above the insurance “loss of use” . . . The grant limit is \$30,300 . . . for [such uses as] housing, transportation, medical . . .”

Kevin Wynne, Federal Small Business Administration (SBA) Communication Specialist (916-216-9849, kevin.wynne@sba.gov), stated that the SBA has “low-interest loans available up to \$200,000 at 2.687% interest for homeowners and renters, and up to \$2,000,000 at 4% interest for businesses . . . including debris removal loans.”

5. The [City] Planning and the [City] Building Safety Departments will present testimony on the status of the mobile home parks and issues related to safety standards and regulations.

Building and Safety

Luis P. Sanchez, Sr. Structural Engineer, L.A. Building and Safety Dept. (213-482-6787), stated that the [L.A.] Building and Safety Department (DBS) has “no authority at mobile home parks . . . [and he] believes we [could] enforce the same regulations at mobile home parks that we do to single-family homes.” Councilman Alarcon “would like an analysis from [the] Building and Safety [Department] as to what we need to recommend [for the building of] mobile home parks, the differences between the City and State building codes, and what we can do about the differences.” He explained some history of mobile home park regulations and how they ended up being regulated by the State, not by the City or Federal governments.

Planning Department

John Dugan, Deputy Planning Director, (213-978-1274, john.dugan@lacity.org), clarified that if the OMHP management wants to rebuild as it was, they only need State clearance. If they want to rebuild with changes, they need to apply for a City “Public Benefit Project Permit,” which they previously obtained as a CUP [Conditional Use Permit] issued in the late 1970s. They had applied before the Fire to the City and the State to expand the Park by 60 units. If the Permit is appealed,

the application would go to the City Council, where the ingress/egress issue could be taken up. A CUP “is very general” and doesn’t specify fire-resistant vegetation; “we can improve there.” Councilman Alarcon expressed that he “wants to create a project that’ll be profitable for the owner and safe for the residents.”

6. City agencies will present testimony on the various services available to victims of the Sayre Fire

Public Works

Rob Hancock, L.A. Bureau of Engineering Geologist, testified that “studies will come out in two weeks on the Sesnon and Marek Fires . . . A geologist will be [at the Sayre Fire site] tomorrow morning to see what damage there is.” Stakeholder Tom is concerned that soil may slide onto his property due to the coming rains. Stakeholder Jeff Lund is concerned about violations of the 72-hour parking law regarding apparently abandoned vehicles parked on Claywood Ave. and Trego St. possibly blocking future evacuation efforts, and potential storm drain blockage problems.

L.A. Department of Water and Power

Wendy Yancy, Spokesperson, LADWP (213-367-4211; www.ladwp.com), stated that the DWP “will make sure that [OMHP] residents are not billed . . . for unused time . . . Please call” 1-800-DIALDWP to get assistance. All LADWP Customer Service Centers will accept donations for the fire victims. Councilman Alarcon added that the DWP was re-connecting people before the fire was finished being put out.

L.A. Housing Department

Roberto Aldape, Interim Assistant General Manager, L.A. Housing Department (213-808-8888 or toll-free 866-557-RENT [7368]; www.lacity.org/lahd), reported that they’ve “been collecting information . . . and assessing the housing needs of the OMHP residents.” He’ll share information with the LTRC.

Community Redevelopment Agency

Councilman Alarcon described the CRA’s participation in community “economic recovery” efforts using “AB 912 [California State Assembly Bill 912] money” discretionary funds. [CRA Contact: Lisa Bianconi, Community Affairs Director (818-753-1918; l.bianconi@cra.lacity.org).]

Housing Authority

Lourdes Castro-Ramirez, Director of Section 8, L.A. Housing Authority (213-252-2570; lcastro@hacla.org; www.hacla.org), testified that they are working to coordinate assistance with other agencies. To qualify for short-term or long-term rent assistance, a family of four must not earn more than \$37,900 annually. Seniors “are not exempt from income caps.” Long-term housing assistance is also available through FEMA.

[Other agencies]

Khalil Gharios, Division Manager, L.A. Bureau of Sanitation (213-485-3023; Khalil.Gharios@lacity.org; www.lacity.org/san), stated that “we won’t be charging [OMHP] customers” for removal of debris put into one of the Bureau’s trash bins in the Park, and will not charge the monthly trash pick-up fee until the DWP restores power to the Park.” Councilman Alarcon added that he has a Motion now moving through the City Council regarding “what should and shouldn’t be on the [Sanitation] bill.”

Aaron Sahakian, of the L.A. Dept. of Transportation (DOT) Traffic Operations, announced that residents on Red Flag streets can sign up to be notified of Red Flag [restricted parking] Days. They “will make every effort to notify the residents” of the 10500 Eldridge Ave. and 11100 Christy Ave. blocks.

Steven Sawyer, of Time-Warner Cable, stated that they’ll contact all customers [affected by the Fire] about “ceasing billing” and arranging call forwarding.

Tim Sheahan, Golden State Mobile Home Owners League (800-888-1727), said there’s a Disaster Relief Fund available to residents.

Councilman Alarcon said, “The primary reason for this Hearing was because we’re here for the long haul.” He thanked all the City Departments for attending and supporting the recovery efforts, and “particularly wants to thank the [Sylmar] Neighborhood Council . . . it was a pleasure to be here with you . . . the Sylmar Neighborhood Council is reflective of how the Neighborhood Council system can work, largely because the Neighborhood Council is engaged and doing the right thing . . . I anticipate having another Hearing in January.”

Councilman Alarcon **ADJOURNED** the Meeting without any objections at 8:06 p.m.

Minutes written by DL.