

## NEWS

### Experts outline plan for building safety

*Thursday, March 4, 2010 | James Rincon*

Owners discuss disaster prep after plane crash

By James Rincon  
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Emergency situations like the one office workers in the Echelon 1 building faced Feb. 18 when they witnessed a plane flying through their windows, leaving one employee dead and 11 others injured, are the kind of unpredictable incidents that experts say require a building action plan.

“You need to have a plan, whatever that may be. You need to definitely have a way to communicate with the folks that are in your building,” said Chris Toliver, disaster preparedness committee chairman for the Building Owners and Managers Association of Austin. “Have a plan and institute that right away if something does happen, whether it’s evacuation or shelter in place.”

Echelon 1 is one of more than 300 Austin-area buildings that share disaster-preparedness practices through BOMA Austin, which encompasses Pflugerville.

Although eligible, no Pflugerville building owners or managers participate in the BOMA network, which Toliver said hosts seminars and workshops on safety planning.

Pflugerville Police Chief Chuck Hooker said planning for building emergencies is the responsibility of each owner and manager.

“When it came down to it, fire was the primary concern once the initial explosion occurred, and it’s pretty well up to each individual city building to keep the evacuation plans in place and to train on that evacuation plan,” Hooker said. “Every building is inspected by the fire department on a yearly basis, and at that time they make sure they look at the emergency exits and make sure that those things are in order, uncovered, not blocked.”

In addition to the annual fire inspection, Pflugerville buildings undergo city inspection when they are built to identify possible hazards and obstacles that may hinder emergency evacuation.

“When a building is built we, in conjunction with the fire department, make sure that there are what they call paths of egress – basically exit paths that are wide enough for everyone to get out and the doors are big enough for the occupant load.” city building official Blake Overmyer said.

If a Pflugerville building were to incur structure damage like Echelon 1 did, Overmyer would assess its structural stability for occupants’ safety and post notices stating whether it is safe, restricted to property retrieval, or if it is entirely unsafe.

Overmyer's safety assessment is a step in the city's emergency action plan, which is overseen by officials at Emergency Operation Centers for either Travis County or Pflugerville.

"The person in charge in an emergency is our mayor. The mayor would report to the EOC, and he actually would be in charge of the operation and from that, all the support that any of the groups might need from the incident command location or multiple incident command locations," said Hooker, who is also the city's emergency management coordinator. "If something like [the Echelon attack] happened in the city, we would have to coordinate the outside response of other agencies to come in here. We'd need additional police support; we could very easily need support from the city of Austin's streets department that has access to heavier equipment, chainsaws and personnel. And really the biggest challenge would be how to stage that equipment at the location we would set it up at... The logistics are why you set up the emergency Operations Center and also to have one single voice when these types of incidents occur."

Hooker said he can activate the EOC, as can the mayor, the city manager and several other officials, in anticipation of or in the event of an emergency.

The County and Pflugerville EOC may be active 24-hours a day for several days depending on the magnitude of the incident, Hooker said, however, Hooker, Overmyer and Toliver agree that first line of defense for any building is having an emergency plan and being well practiced at executing it.

"Practice, practice, practice – the biggest thing is the practice. Because when an event happens, whatever it may be, there's the panic that's going to set in," Toliver said. "It's the training that's going to kick back in. That memorization of where the stairwell is, where the exit is, do I know how to get there. Because in that panic, and in that smoke-filled hallway, if you have to try to remember back, 'Oh gosh, where's that exit?' it's just not going to happen unless you practice and know – it's four doors down on the right."

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