

ALLENTOWN COMMUNITY MEETING

March 28, 2023 at 5:30pm
Tukwila Community Center

MINUTES

Response Planning for Rail, Emergency Management Planning for City - Puget Sound Regional Fire Authority,

As of January 1, 2023, the City of Tukwila is under contract with Puget Sound Regional Fire Authority (RFA). The RFA combines the fire department resources of Covington, Kent, Maple Valley, SeaTac, and Tukwila under one command. The RFA spoke at the meeting about how they would respond in the case of a hazardous spill from rail cars.

One of the benefits of the City joining RFA is a full-time dedicated hazardous materials response. Training for hazardous material spill response is rigorous and includes regular out-of-state sessions which are sponsored by rail companies, including BNSF. RFA drills are specific to the conditions and resources in our area, so if something were to happen, their response would be prompt and thorough, and emergency communications would run smoothly.

We are fortunate that Tukwila is in a region with a large range and number of emergency responders that would respond quickly to an emergency, including local, state, and federal agencies, and the military out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

Questions:

Q: Is BNSF required to keep you informed of materials they are carrying?

A: That information is available to the hazardous materials team. Also - all hazardous materials must be visibly labeled on the rail cars carrying them. BNSF is not responsible for what trucks are transporting until it is loaded onto their trains.

Q: Are there rules and regulations as to how much hazardous material can be carried on a train at one time?

A: There are no rules as to how much can be carried at a time, but there are rules and regulations on how materials are spaced on a train. There are certain materials that cannot be next to each other. In some cases, cars carrying sand must be placed between cars with hazardous materials.

BNSF and train companies do not have the right to refuse freight. They don't have full control of what they accept, but they do have control of how they are loaded and where they go.

Q: Who investigates accidents?

A: The National Transportation Safety Board.

Q: How are hazardous materials defined? There have been a lot of protests around coal dust. Is that considered a hazardous material?

A: Coal is not considered a hazardous material. Hazardous materials are classified by governed by public health officials in the federal government, industry experts, and others at a federal level.

Q: Is there a place for the general public to see what BNSF is transporting?

A: No, the RFA can see what BNSF is transporting, but that information is not available to the general public because it could be used by terrorist or other people planning harmful activities. Also – BNSF is a private company, so their information does not need to be shared publicly.

You can usually find out in a general sense of volume and commodities traveling through a City by using a Google search to see a rough estimate of what is coming through on a rail line.

Q: What is that petitioning process to get more information from BNSF?

A: The BNSF website has community right-to-know information. You can search for information and contact BNSF there.

Q: How do you prioritize how you respond to a hazardous situation in a large area?

A: Each situation is different. We look at where we could provide the most benefit with the available resources. We would use our training to try to be as efficient as possible. We all cooperate so often that it's not a problem to communicate and cooperate with neighboring jurisdictions. Our priority is life safety - we are going to prioritize human life over anything else.

The RFA has what they call hazmat Saturdays, where we train, do drills, and prepare for emergency hazmat incidents. Some of the drills are intermodal, some facility related, etc. We practice and work through how we would access an incident site and prepare for worst case scenarios. We look at each incident as being unique, each with its own demands for making the incident site safe and stable. We also drill with neighboring jurisdictions and regions, and with people out of Fort Lewis. We do these drills on a monthly basis.

Q: How often do you encounter hazmat events?

A: The RFA responds to hazmat calls about once a day. Most are natural gas related.

Q: What would be the evacuation plan if there was an incident in Allentown?

A: It would depend on the incident type and location. There are different ways in which we would notify and/or evacuate people. In the first few minutes, we would determine an isolation distance (how far away from the incident people must be). We would use social media and other methods of communication (from City of Tukwila, RFA, etc.); and utilize public works, police, and anyone else who is qualified, to close streets and physically evacuate. The RFA also has a fire engine with all metering and monitoring equipment needed right now to determine if there are airborne hazards, etc.

City Emergency Management

Mindy Mattson, the City's Emergency Manager, also provided context as to how the City of Tukwila would respond to an event. The City's emergency response approach would be two-prong. First, City emergency management would set up an emergency operations center in the Justice Center, which would be run by City staff and subject matter experts. Second, we would make sure we are ensuring the safety of Tukwila's residents, and meeting their needs.

There is an emergency notification system called Alert King County, which is a reverse 911 notification system. The City has pamphlets that provide instructions on how to sign up in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. They also have a flyer with a QR code to access other languages.

You can enter one or multiple addresses to get responses specific to your location. The message may be to shelter in place and check on your neighbors or to evacuate (it will depend on the situation). Regardless of the event - train derailment, earthquake, flooding, etc. - it is helpful for personal preparedness.

Q: If we know folks that are elderly or homebound, is there a way to let them know Alert King County is available?

A: Yes, absolutely, you can sign yourself up and assist neighbors as needed. The more people we can get on the system, the better.

Tukwila also provides emergency response team training for the public. We did a joint training with neighboring cities last year, but not a lot of Tukwila residents attended. Last year's training was the first one post pandemic.

Truck Reroute EIS Updates

The project engineers and planners are looking at truck route alternatives based on the comments you provided during the initial scoping period.

In early to mid-May, we will hold a public open house to present drawings showing our first take on schematic truck route alternatives, give you a chance to talk to the project engineers who are developing the alternatives, and get your feedback. Similar to the initial scoping period, there will be 30-day window during which you can provide comment.