

What's next for Del Norte?

August 28, 2023



In the wake of city and county emergency declarations, an uncertain cloud looms over the community

The monster Smith River Complex of fires has left its scar of impact on Del Norte. Over 70,000 acres of charred forest, the de-energized sole power lifeline shut down leaving Del Norte in the dark for a week, several destroyed homes and a dollar amount yet to be quantified remains the legacy of the lightening-strike fires of August 14, 2023.

On the plus side of this act of mother- nature, if there is one, a community came together to ease the pain of our neighbors and families during this event. Through the Pacific Power mutual aid agreement with Pacific Gas and Electric, between 16-20 mega generators were in place within hours of the power cutoff.

Daily consumption of fuel is averaging over 24,000 gallons of mostly diesel to power Del Norte County. PG&E Incident teams have provided maintenance pole insulation to protect the one and only power conduit.

Senator Mike McGuire's promise, "you will have everything you'll need," was a fulfilled one. Water, Red Cross-provided temporary shelter, community resource centers established for showers and similar support services were expediently provided.

As conditions slowly improve and Del Norte County returns to some sort of normal, one may ask what are the expectations of those who work and live here.

Both city and county quickly passed emergency proclamations within hours of the power shutdown. That decision made by councilors and supervisors is turning out to be a prudent one because the county and to a lesser extent, the city has a very challenging and ominous rainy season on the horizon.

During public comments at the August 22 Board of Supervisors meeting, speaker Sam Strait addressed supervisors and asked why there was no redundancy power line from Curry County just twenty miles away. For those of you who do not understand exactly what is redundancy, and that lack of understanding is quite prevalent, an emergency redundancy power line replaces the failed power conduit Pacific Power de-energized, August 18 at 4:05PM (PDT).

Speaker Strait blamed the breakdown on the inability of the Golden State and the Beaver State to get along and maintain the redundant line. It's actually a bit more complicated than squabbling inter-state politicians. Apparently, the cable connection between Oregon and California is not compatible.

In an uncharacteristic, if not rare retort, a board member actually addressed speaker Strait. Supervisor Chris Howard responded by advising the community indeed, there was once a mutual aid agreement some two decades ago and upon Curry County electing to switch the power source to Coos-Curry Electric, the redundant line disappeared in 2005 due to technical incompatibility. Howard spoke about a new conduit from Harbor to the power source in Ft. Dick, in introducing an emergency power line which would serve the mutual needs of each community, irrespective of the border. He referenced the then-Tri Agency as being responsible for the successful completion of the alternate power conduit.

There was no reference by Howard to place this item on the upcoming agenda for discussion or call for action.

Supervisor Valerie Starkey entered this rare public comment exchange by expressing her concern Pacific Power "needs to communicate better."

After the meeting, The Triplicate contacted all supervisors requesting each share their concerns on the dire conditions which will undoubtedly affect road conditions on the now-bare hill landscape along 199 and many

other roads within the Smith River Complex.

Supervisor Dean Wilson shared his insight on this looming and daunting condition of roads within the complex. “ Currently, we are dealing with the Smith River Complex Fire as it continues to threaten our community, but we need to think ahead.” Wilson continued, “ As the fire passes, we will have to focus in on the recovery and impacts of the aftermath of this fire. As the rains come, ash and mud will be moving, impacting Highway 199 and our watershed. We must move quickly to plan on how we will prepare to prevent these events and recover from this terrible fire.”

The Board of Supervisors meets Tuesday, September 12 at 10AM in the Flynn Center.