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Prepared by: Ellis County Communications
101 W. Main Street
Waxahachie, TX 75165

Contact: Diana Buckley, 972-825-5087, Diana.Buckley@co.ellis.tx.us

Well orchestrated response averts tragedy at Magnablend

Planning and preparation were obvious in the expert response to Monday's devastating fire at the Magnablend chemical plant in Waxahachie – a response that averted potential human tragedy.

“When I walked over to the courts building on Monday, looming in the background was this wall of black smoke,” recalled Ellis County Judge Carol Bush. “The plume was stunning. It was such an obvious signal that something was terribly wrong.”

Bush immediately began receiving phone calls and e-mails offering assistance. “The nature and the intensity of the fire suggested potential for tragedy and my immediate fear was for the public's safety,” she said.

Within minutes, first responders were on the scene; within hours, the list of responding agencies was nothing short of impressive. Fire departments from Waxahachie, Midlothian, Red Oak, Ovilla, Ennis, Forreston, DeSoto, and Lancaster responded to the chemical plant, while Emergency Service District #6 provided support to fill the fire stations that would otherwise have been left vacant.

“The County was fortunate to have such a swift and overwhelming response from the Waxahachie Fire Department and our neighboring communities,” Bush said.

Lancaster sent a hazmat team, as did Dallas, and within three hours of the alarms sounding, DPS Emergency Management, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, and the Environmental Protection Agency were all on the scene. Law enforcement personnel responded from the Ellis County Sheriff's Office, Waxahachie Police Department, DPS, and even the FBI. The scene was evaluated by a Weapons of Mass Destruction team to rule out an act of terrorism with implications of further threats. Amy Hollywood, public information officer for the City of Waxahachie, worked at the scene as well, gathering and disseminating up-to-date information to media sources for broadcast to the public.

Bush had nothing but praise for the professionalism and expertise of entities responding to the scene, the commitment to protecting the public, and the dissemination of information as it

became available. It was a sentiment shared by Dr. Glenn Ledbetter, who was contacted by Bush to assist in the identification and evaluation of potential public health concerns.

“In visiting with the team, and reflecting on what transpired, I realized this was truly a regional response, a coordinated effort, that was required, to manage the situation in a safe way,” said Ledbetter, who volunteers his time as the county’s health authority. “It was really tremendous, the coordination of the police departments to manage the roadways, and the activation of the evacuation plan as dictated by the degree of the accident. The kids were safely moved from the school, and the frail elderly at Covenant Place were transferred out of harm’s way.”

It demonstrates exactly why such systems are in place: it is impossible to predict when an emergency will occur that will demand this type of response.

Ledbetter also noted that the local hospital was prepared to handle what might have been mass casualties in this magnitude of a fire event.

“But fortunately, only two people were evaluated in the first four hours, and it was determined that those were non-threatening, stress-related issues,” he added.

Within three hours, the EPA had monitors in place, both on the ground and in the air, seeking to detect any potentially harmful particulates or gases in the plume of black smoke that stretched north to northwest from the site.

“It was very reassuring,” Ledbetter said. “They have protocols, and they followed their protocols. If at any time the thresholds on the air quality index should be exceeded, or they should identify any toxins, they had the capability right there to ramp up the evacuation area or notify the proper authorities of the potential for harm.”

Bush expressed extreme gratitude to all that played a role in responding and mitigating the damage. “There are so many to be thanked: our first responders, fire, police, TCEQ, EPA, Red Cross, Regional Emergency Management support, the City of Waxahachie, Dr. Ledbetter. And the list goes on. It is as extensive as my gratitude to all involved for a job well done.”

“This wasn’t just an incident from which we were removed,” she said. “The company is part of Ellis County, and the people that work there are our friends and neighbors; it adds a personal element to this devastating incident. These were people we know who were suffering this great loss, people that were traumatized by the event and now must regroup while Magnablend recovers and rebuilds.”

According to Ledbetter, Magnablend received praise from officials at both TCEQ and the EPA for its response.

“They both said that typically they have to beg the responsible party for more resources – this response has been four-fold what they usually see,” he said. “It’s been handled with real integrity.”

Still, the lingering odor has been a source of concern to people in the area, with just under a hundred people phoning the county’s hotline to inquire. Many say they experienced nausea or headaches that they connected with the chemical smell in the air.

“The smell is thought to be due to smoldering aspects of the fire, and once those are extinguished completely, we expect it to rapidly dissipate over the next few days,” Ledbetter said. “It is felt that the odor is from sulfur that is a byproduct of the pet products that were being manufactured in the building, and there are no toxicity concerns with that.”

Completing the cleanup of the site will likely take two to three months, and officials expect to gain new information and insights into the origin of the disaster as they dismantle the debris.

“Even in a tragic situation like this, it does restore your faith in mankind, that when it’s needed, people pull together,” Bush said. “There was obvious sincerity on the part of Magnablend

in trying to reach out to their own, to try to assist in mitigating the incident, and I have nothing but gratitude for all the different entities that responded and offered their assistance.”

Everything that should have been done in an emergency was done, through preparation, planning, calm, and organization.

“As a community, I think we should be proud and abundantly thankful that a greater tragedy was averted,” Bush concluded.