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by Ann Elsbach

Last month we spoke of our Fire Chief Roger Chatterton's concerns about the potential for a major disaster in Trinity Center should an aircraft crash into town. His concern centered around the issue of cutting trees on the town side of the Trinity Center Airport runway. To recap: CalTrans has said that the trees on the town-side of the Trinity Center Airport must be cut. They are concerned about pilots crashing into the trees should they lose control of their aircraft. Roger sees those same trees as a psychological barrier, a "black wall". Why would a pilot in trouble turn toward trees when he has a clear option in the opposite direction toward open space and the lake?

Roger is the Fire Chief for both Trinity Center and Coffee Creek and has a background in fire fighting and with the Sheriff's Dept.

And now from Roger: "If a pilot experiences a problem, and veers towards the lake, and does go down, we as firefighters and EMTs have a solo air crash site to deal with – albeit one that can involve multiple casualties depending on number of SOB, fire and HAZMAT. [EMT stands for Emergency Medical Technician, HAZMAT denotes hazardous materials, such as inflammables, and SOB means souls on board]

If instead of heading toward the lake, the pilot veers towards the trees and town, and goes down, there is an extremely high probability that the aircraft may impact near or directly into an occupied dwelling. That could mean numerous additional casualties – especially in summer when the town population is higher and there are more take-offs and landings which would raise the statistical probability of an incident. Thus a crash would go from a solo casualty incident to a mass casualty incident which the fire department(s) would have to handle. Besides the probability of additional casualties, the potential for fire goes beyond the aircraft and surrounding vegetation to structural fire with the potential for rapid spread to additional structures given the relative structural density in town. In the original scenario of an aircraft going down other than in the tress or town, the only HAZMAT is aircraft fuel. In town, on the other hand, every occupied building has a propane tank, plus the other HAZMAT we all have around the house or property. If the aircraft were to directly hit a propane tank there would be a large explosion.

If an aircraft veered into the trees or town and impacted, here is what our fire/EMS/rescue priorities would be:

1. Lives over property. That means:
 - A. Triage, treat and transport the viable patients.
 - B. Evacuate persons in the path of fire.
 - C. Evacuate persons proximate to the HAZMAT.
2. Once the above elements are controlled, we would then do the following:
 - A. Fight the fire(s). Note: Depending on wind velocity and direction, fuel moisture content, etc. such a fire has significant probability of spotting and starting additional fires besides the fire at the crash scene.
 - B. Isolate and contain the HAZMAT

Such a scenario would far exceed the combined resources of Trinity Center VFD and Coffee Creek VFD which would function as a single team. In summertime, the USFS would respond from Mule Creek and Coffee Creek if they were not otherwise committed.

However, they are wildland firefighters, therefore EMS, rescue and HAZMAT functions are beyond their scope.

In such a scenario FEAT [Fire Emergency Assistance Team] would be critical. We don't have enough personnel in both fire departments to treat and evacuate patients, fight fire, evacuate residents, and isolate and contain HAZMAT as well as handle traffic, communications. FEAT members would be trained to handle the latter two tasks as well as others to free fire fighters to do their job. Unfortunately, FEAT is on hiatus at this time due to the cost of workers compensation insurance. [In a future article Roger will speak more in detail about the need for FEAT.]

Our fire departments would be overwhelmed should such a tragedy occur. We would request mutual aid from Weaverville Fire Department and other agencies, however given time, distance, and response factors we could not expect help to arrive in less than an hour from the time of the crash. Patients deteriorate, fire is progressive, and HAZMAT-affected areas expand and thus time is an enemy.

Therefore, from a fire, rescue, EMS standpoint, whatever needs to be done to keep approaching or departing aircraft away from the town proper is the safest and most controllable, and thus prudent action to pursue. Thus, the trees which create a psychological barrier to encourage pilots not to fly over the town, is a valid, and in my estimation, compelling argument.”