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City's Goal Should Be Preparation

By Bob Doppelt

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The elements of the resilience section of the City of Eugene's draft Climate Action Plan 2.0 include local food sourcing by school districts, emergency water provision by EWEB, trauma-informed training for first responders and other activities. While important, they do not constitute a plan to prepare Eugeniens for climate impacts. What would a meaningful resilience strategy entail?

First, let's clarify what we should prepare for. Average global surface temperatures are now higher than any time since civilization started about 10,000 years ago. Barring a miracle, within 10 years or so, temperatures will rise more than 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels, which is the level scientists say will greatly accelerate harmful climate impacts.

We have disrupted the earth's climate system, so one consequence we should plan for is more wildfires, smoke emergencies, extreme storms, droughts, heat waves and other disasters. Historically, we have dealt with single-event disasters that ended and gave people time to recover. However, as seen in locations worldwide hit earliest by climate impacts, as temperatures rise we will likely experience increasingly repetitive, intense, interconnected and cumulative disasters that are intermixed with toxic stresses and leave little time for recovery.

Wildfires are a profoundly destructive force because valued possessions and entire neighborhoods can literally become ashes. Toxic smoke can damage unburned assets and harm public health. Infernos and other disasters often cause severe anxiety, depression, PTSD, complicated grief, hopelessness and other mental health

disorders. Rising drug and alcohol addiction, child and spousal abuse, interpersonal aggression, violence and other psychosocial maladies are also likely. Left unaddressed, these reactions will threaten everyone's health, safety and well-being. They also will make reducing emissions even more difficult.

The goal of the city's climate resilience plan should be to prepare residents for these adversities by combining external physical preparedness with building widespread capacity for psychological and psycho-social-spiritual resilience.

Experience globally indicates that a single overarching coordinating council is needed to lead the effort. Mental and physical health professionals should come together with emergency managers, social justice, education, faith, business, climate and other leaders around the shared goal of building universal capacity for resilience and renewal.

The council's first step would be to assess the community's existing capacity for resilience and determine who has access to resilience education and support services and who does not. The messages people hear from their social support network, the authorities they respect and the media also should be identified because they can exert significant influence on how people respond to extreme hardships.

A strategy would then be crafted to fill the gaps and ensure that every resident has the opportunity to learn demographically and age-appropriate resilience information and skills. The promotion of social narratives that foster safe, healthy, equitable and just ways to respond to adversities would be a central element of the approach. Information about emergency food sources, water, power, sanitation, housing and other basic services would also be integrated into the plan.

Universal resilience education and skills-training will prevent and help people heal from many types of traumas beyond climate disasters. People will also realize that assisting others and restoring nature are powerful ways to find meaning, purpose and hope.

Preparing Eugenians for the accelerating impacts of the climate emergency would be one of the most important outcomes of the city's climate plan.

Bob Doppelt writes a monthly column for The Register Guard on climate change-related issues.