Opinion

How Silicon Valley can prevent earthquake catastrophe

A 7.0-magnitude earthquake along the Hayward fault could kill hundreds, and thousands more may be injured and displaced from their homes

by Alexis Podesta & Russell Hancock | The Mercury News | May 2, 2018

What's the difference between a disaster and a catastrophe? Preparation.

California is earthquake country, but here in Northern California we're out of practice for this particular Golden State hazard. It's been nearly 30 years since the Loma Prieta quake — a year before the first web browser unleashed the internet and all it would mean to Silicon Valley. It was a time before being connected and “always on” were even concepts, much less a way of life. Hours passed before we began to learn the full impact of Loma Prieta's power and devastation.

What would be the impact of such a major earthquake today? And how prepared are we, even now that the internet and wireless devices connect us to our families, our jobs and our community 24/7?

Last month a coalition of organizations, including ours, took a major step toward answering these questions by releasing the HayWired scenario, a scientifically plausible illustration of what a 7.0-magnitude earthquake along the Hayward fault might do.

The consequences of such a rupture will be significant and widespread. Hundreds could die and thousands more could be injured and displaced from their homes. East Bay residents could lose water for up to six months in some locations. Lack of firefighting water could leave thousands of single-family homes unprotected from hundreds of fires.

Beyond the anticipated human cost and property destruction, basic utilities such as water and power – not to mention communications – will recover over days and weeks, not hours. The quake will cripple our transportation infrastructure, causing gridlock that makes today’s grinding commutes look quaint by comparison. The Bay Area economy will suffer, with some companies unable or unwilling to reopen, leaving employees and customers behind.

What can we do, and what should we do?

A host of partners have contributed time, effort and knowledge to HayWired to help identify the possible impacts of a major earthquake and start building the collaborative networks we’ll need to bounce back as a region. Building from coalition members such as the Association of Bay Area Governments/Metropolitan Planning Commission and Joint Venture Silicon Valley, business and
government interests have come together to assess their own vulnerabilities and are working to address them.

Meanwhile, how can you get more prepared?

The State of California Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency and the Seismic Safety Commission have teamed up with Joint Venture on the Outsmart Disaster Campaign, an effort to raise awareness about how you can prepare for such catastrophes. OutsmartDisaster.com is your source for tools and information you need to ready your family, home, business and community.

We are also launching the Resilient Business Challenge – a call to action supported by leading companies and organizations in the state. The program is structured with a building-block approach that invites California businesses new to resiliency investments to step in and mature companies to step up to assist their communities and foster innovation. It is a flexible, nonprescriptive process designed to start discussion and collectively increase state resiliency before and after a natural disaster.

The Resilient Business Challenge has action steps, tool kits and information at OutsmartDisaster.com for use by businesses of all sizes to build their earthquake preparedness.

Join us in our efforts to get better prepared. Together, we can outsmart disaster.

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