



EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS 2021

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ALMEDA FIRE
RESPONSE

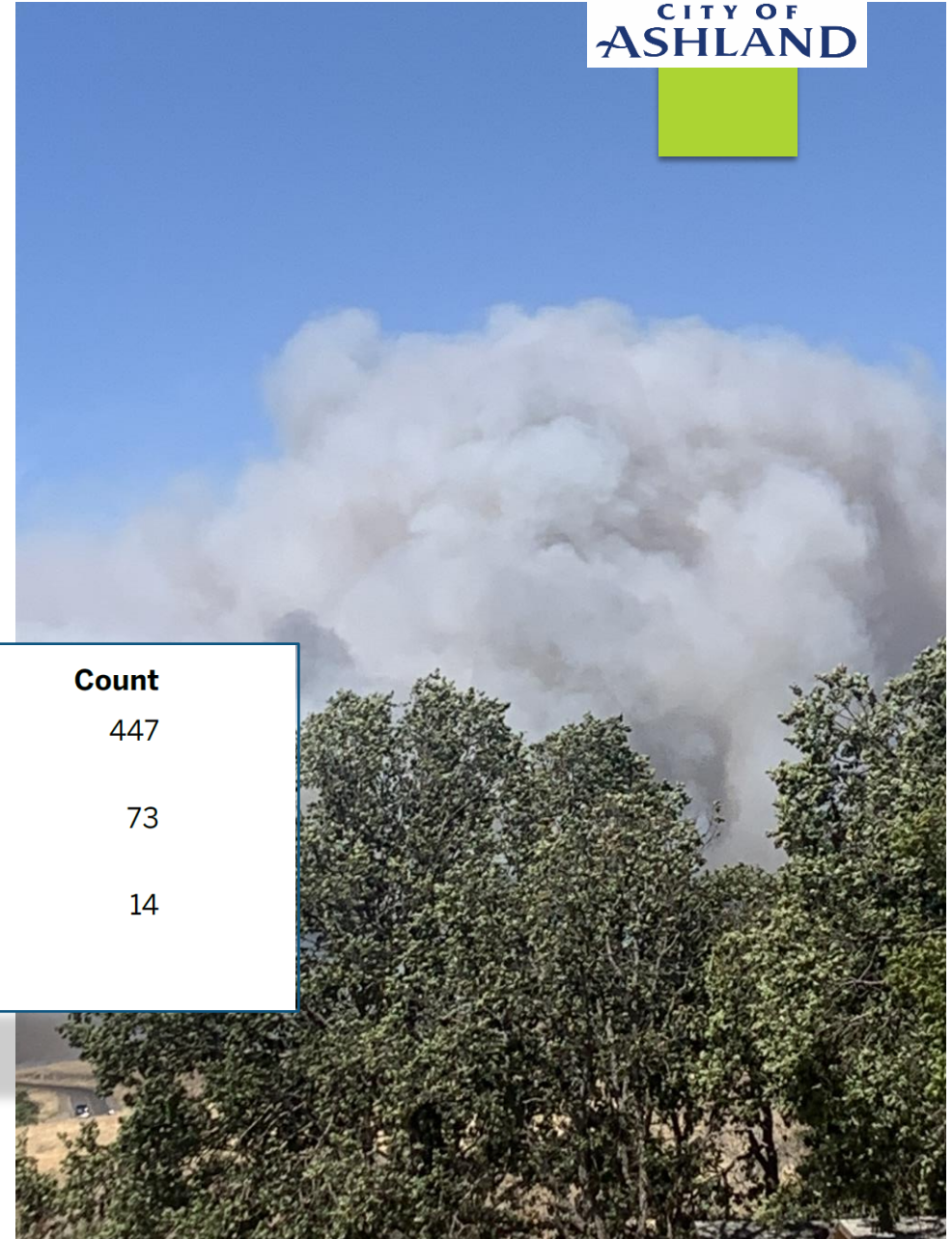
ALMEDA FIRE RESPONSE— Community Engagement Survey Results

- ▶ Open Town Hall was used to engage the public regarding the City's Response to the Almeda Fire.
- ▶ October 5, 2020 – October 21, 2020
- ▶ 672 Visits
- ▶ 534 Responses
- ▶ Equal to 26.7 hours of Public Comment to help shape the City's response to future emergencies
- ▶ Goal of the survey was to receive constructive feedback on two key areas of Emergency Response:
Communication and Evacuation






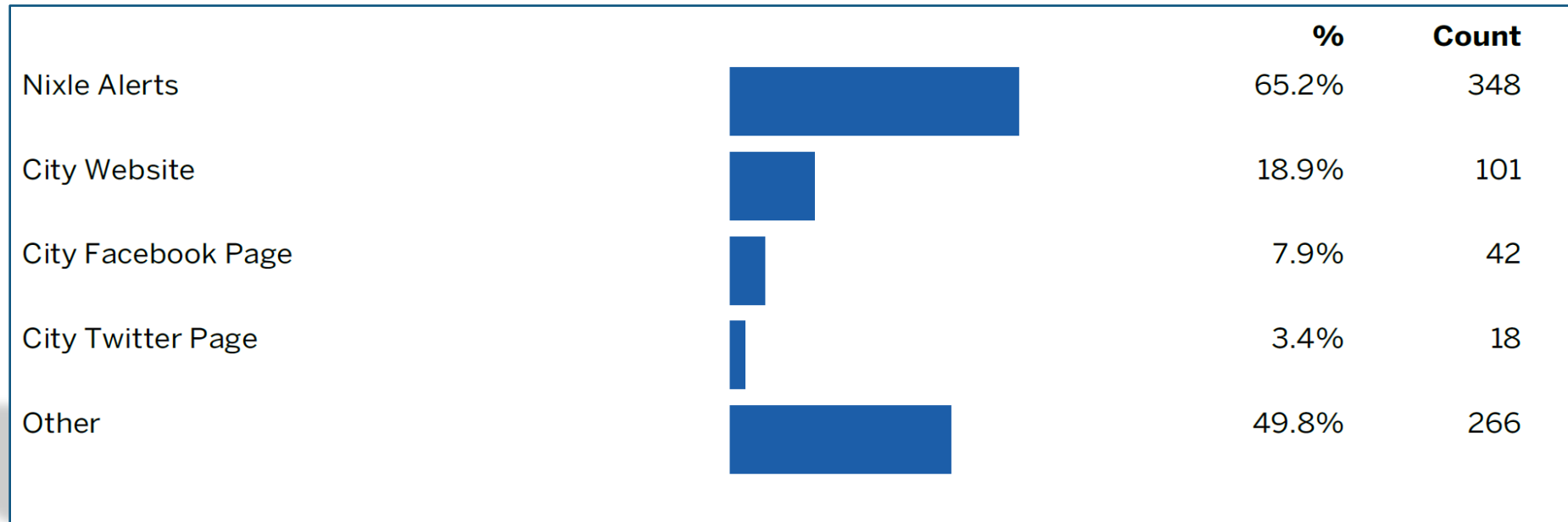
Question #1

Were you enrolled in Nixle before the Alameda Fire on September 8th?



Question #2 – Did you find the Level of communication through Nixle to be adequate during the Alameda Fire’s active phase?

		%	Count
Yes		25.8%	138
No		51.3%	274
Other		22.8%	122



Question #3

How did you access Alameda Fire resources or informational updates from the City of Ashland?

OTHER SOURCES UTILIZED FOR FIRE UPDATES:

- ▶ Police scanners
- ▶ Pulse Point
- ▶ City website
- ▶ JPR
- ▶ Jackson County website
- ▶ Local News Channels
- ▶ SOU Alerts
- ▶ Facebook – several groups were established for Alameda Fire updates
- ▶ Word-of-mouth/neighborhood networks
- ▶ Phone call to the City
- ▶ Next door groups

Question #4

Thinking of your specific needs for communication during the Alameda Fire, how could the City have improved its notification process for you?

- ▶ Notifications need to have **clear, unambiguous language with specific instruction** about who should evacuate, what routes to take, and where to evacuate to. Alternate routes might be necessary to manage traffic flow and get residents to safe shelter locations. Provide information about road/wind conditions and road closures and the status of I-5 both directions. Those not being asked to evacuate should have been directed to shelter-in-place to ease traffic congestion. *(The words “Consider Evacuating” was not specific enough, nor was “Quiet Village.” Some evacuees went to Medford and then had to evacuate a second time and could not return home for several days due to road closures).*



Use an emergency siren alert system. People who work nights often silence their phones to sleep and could miss phone alerts. Ashland has a lot of visitors who may not know about Nixle.

There are areas in Ashland where cell phone service is poor or not consistent – There needs to be consideration for communication dead zones.

Nixle, Facebook and Twitter were useless in areas with internet/power outages or with limited cell reception.



Update, Update, Update.


More frequent updates regarding the location of the fire and evacuation routes relevant to each neighborhood. Keep the lines of communication open with ALL citizens throughout the emergency. (Also include those who should NOT evacuate to reduce traffic for emergency vehicles and evacuees). Many residents work outside of Ashland, so they may be returning to Ashland to evacuate—they need information on how to get home when roads are closed. Some people were aimlessly driving around with no direction which could have impeded evacuation. Updated traffic information was needed due to I-5 closures. **Over communicating is far better than not enough during an emergency.**

Nixle is a great tool for immediate warnings of danger and evacuation, however not a good source for ongoing updates on the fire due to character limits. The City needs to have a transition plan from immediate threat to how to communicate updates on fire conditions after the immediate threat has passed. Consider using Nixle to direct people on where to go for updates and information.

There should be regular notifications during an active emergency, even if there is no new information to report. **Non-evacuees need communication during emergencies too.**

Not all residents are on social media, there needs to be a central location with constantly updated information, especially in an emergency. The City should push consistent information out to multiple media outlets. **Redundancy and consistency of message is key.**



- 
- ▶ **Faster initial notification, more frequent alerts** with specific instruction as the situation progresses, Nixle is effective, but did not keep up with the rapid changes in fire conditions.
 - ▶ *The first Nixle notification went out almost 20 minutes after Pulse Point and police scanners picked up the fire. Police and fire scanners were the most reliable source of information.*
 - ▶ **Everyone should have received the notifications on September 8th.** An opt-in program to communicate about a significant community emergency or disaster is unacceptable. During a dangerous emergency, everyone should receive notification like an **Amber Alert** that overrides everything.
 - ▶ **Businesses need to be included** in the alert to be able to inform their employees and customers who may not otherwise receive the notifications.
 - ▶ If possible Nixle alerts should be more distinct—special sound or visually different than regular text messages so it is not missed.

- ▶ **Disasters do not make the distinction between Cities.** People live and work within the Rogue Valley, so a regional alert is needed.
- ▶ **Improve coordination with the County** - We either need one location regionally where information is sent and updated often during an emergency, or the same information needs to go to all media outlets so the entire County can remain informed.
- ▶ **Having more context on the scope of the emergency is necessary**—not just what is relevant to Ashland. There is not much separation between communities, so we all need to know what is going on in the region Include other cities, and residences outside the UGB in the notification zone.



More public education is needed on evacuation so there is repetition of the message.

- ▶ Consider dividing up the community and designating an evacuation zone for each area so residents always know where to go based on the type of emergency.
- ▶ Train the public on what different evacuation levels mean. Evacuation Levels need to be consistent throughout the region, so everyone understands what they mean regardless of where they live.
- ▶ Provide signs in the community to direct evacuation traffic.





Many residents feel this event is evidence that Ashland cannot depend on the County to provide timely information during an emergency, so **the City has to take the lead in communicating with citizens.**

There should be a lead communicator designated to speak for the City, so citizens know someone is in-charge.

Communication can't be assigned someone who has a primary responsibility fighting fire and can only provide updates when they aren't actively working the emergency. **Communication has to be a separate effort with equal priority.**



Question #5

Do you have any other comments or feedback to share to help us better understand the best way to communicate with the Citizens of Ashland during an emergency?

Better coordination and communication on the ground and in neighborhoods for evacuations.



Place trained volunteers at critical intersections; create contingency plans for changes in conditions.

Neighborhood preparedness plans need to support residents with mobility or other issues during an evacuation. Evacuation plans and training should include the entire community, not just Siskiyou and above.

A coordinated communication plan (multiple forms of communication) is needed. Many residents don't have cell phones or use social media. Everyone needs to know where to find current information after the initial notification. **Communication during a crisis needs to be clear and simple.**

- ▶ The Emergency Broadcast System should have interrupted all programming and provided timely and detailed information.
- ▶ Something needs to ensure I-5 traffic is not re-routed through Ashland. Gridlock and large trucks on City streets escalated fears of being trapped.
- ▶ End the road diet, it negatively impacts evacuation capacity.
- ▶ Public education on planning ahead is needed. What to take, where to go.
- ▶ Continue CERT training in neighborhoods.
- ▶ Door-to-door communication would have been appreciated.
- ▶ Use loudspeakers or megaphones during evacuations.
- ▶ Make AFN available to all residents during an emergency.





Question #6

During the Almeda Fire, were you ever personally advise to evacuate immediately? (Either by knock at the door by Public Safety Officials or a Nixle alert?)



Question #7

If applicable, what were your personal experiences with leaving your neighborhood?

- ▶ **Traffic from I-5 clogged the streets and created a hazard for residents trying to evacuate.** If fire conditions would have changed, entire families would have been stuck in their cars trying to evacuate. Semis, RVs towing cars and trucks towing trailers packed onto roadways.
- ▶ **A different solution for freeway must be found that does not endanger Ashland citizens.** Traffic should have been routed toward Emigrant Lake instead of toward the evacuation zone.
- ▶ **The Road Diet hindered traffic significantly.** Even without freeway traffic, one lane is not sufficient.
- ▶ Rural farm animals were let out on the roadway and it created confusion for those trying to get to safety.



- **Not enough flagging/traffic control at critical intersections.** Traffic was standing still; people were in a state of shock and panic staring at the smoke coming from the fire. Too many people stopped their cars to watch the fire and that led to traffic congestion.
- **There needs to be another exit to the freeway** for the quiet village area. Fire blocked the only two exits. There is only one way to exit many neighborhoods in the City leaving no way out. Ashland Mine Road is another area of concern for evacuation.
- **We are grateful to law enforcement for evacuating door-to-door. They were very quick, respectful and firm.** It was traumatic leaving our home and we were not prepared in the moment for what was happening.
- **More community education on evacuation and how to prepare for emergencies is needed.** Always keep gas tanks half full, have your important documents in one place, etc. Valuable lessons learned for next time.



“We were paralyzed with fear and did not know where to go or what to do.”

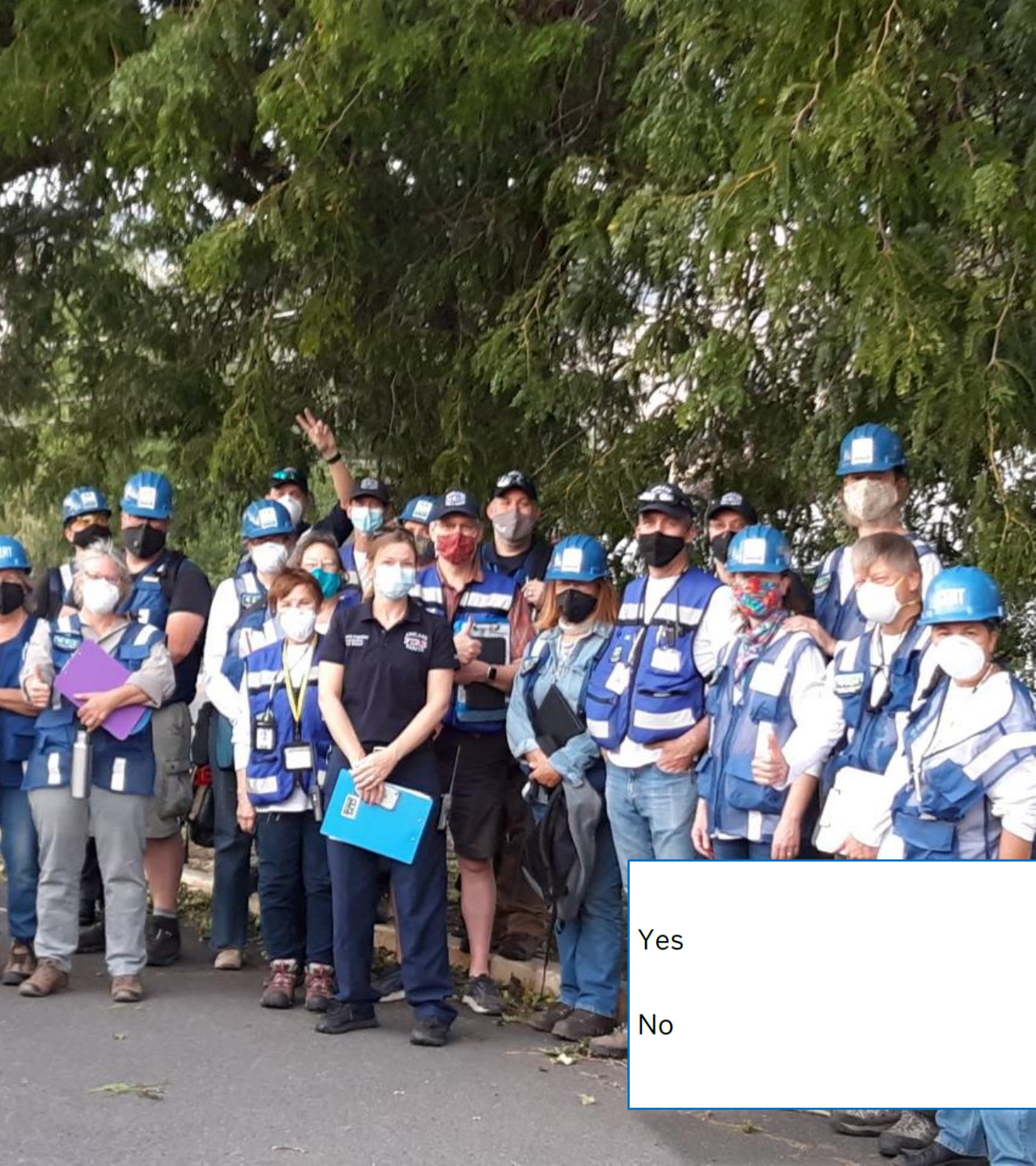
Information that was going out was confusing/conflicting. We received a “Go now” notification but were turned back by police and fire personnel at both exits leaving us to feel extremely scared and trapped. Media outlets were telling people to go to the Expo, but we could not get there.

We were able to safely evacuate, but **we could not get information on when it was safe to return home.**

Nixle voicemail messages were hard to understand. **Use simple terminology during emergencies.** Many locals don’t even know the freeway exit numbers.

Provide alternate routes for evacuation and stress the importance for people not involved to stay off the roadways. People were trying to get pictures and view the fire leading to unnecessary congestion.





Question #8

Have you discussed an evacuation plan with members of your household?



Question #9

Did you decide to evacuate your place of residence in Ashland even though you were not required to do so?



		%	Count
Yes		18.5%	99
No		81.5%	435

Question #10

If you answered yes to the last question, what prompted you to evacuate?

- ▶ Concerns/fears of a situation like Paradise, California
- ▶ Visible flames and Smoke, fire was growing fast
- ▶ Heat combined with high wind conditions created a very high-risk situation
- ▶ Lack of car or means to safely evacuate if the situation escalated
- ▶ Monitoring police scanner
- ▶ Close to the origin of the fire
- ▶ Diversion of I-5/traffic congestion escalated fears of being trapped
- ▶ My workplace/business was evacuated
- ▶ Better safe than sorry
- ▶ Disabled family member requiring extra time to evacuate safely
- ▶ Lack of confidence in Evacuation plan for the City



Question #11

What specific recommendations do you have for the City regarding evacuations of neighborhoods that could improve safe evacuation during an emergency?



Improve emergency notification for anyone in the emergency zone.

Train and education on an **inclusive evacuation plan** for the entire community – neighborhood by neighborhood, including outlying areas. **Practice the plan** so there is less panic in a real emergency.

Create **evacuation maps** that are accessible to the public on-line; better traffic control.

Establish more evacuation routes – even primitive emergency only roads. **End the road diet.**

Coordinate within the region on emergency planning (County, ODOT, etc.) and **improve communications** for the next event. **Plan for all scenarios** – loss of power, pandemic, I-5 Closure.

Don't approve any new subdivisions without considering impact on evacuation for the community.



Question #12

Is there any additional information you would like us to know?

- ▶ This survey is a great start. **Thank you for taking input!** Involve the public in creating a better emergency plan.
- ▶ Better **fuel management/weed control** – tougher restrictions through ordinances if necessary.
- ▶ Address the issue of homelessness so they don't have to camp along the Greenway and in the watershed adding to the fire risk.
- ▶ **Expand AFN** so all residents have better internet access.
- ▶ **Early warnings and proactive measures** during Red Flag wind/weather conditions.
- ▶ Make resolving the **funding issues** in the Fire Department a top priority.
- ▶ More needs to be done about **water shortages** during Fire Season.

Get **“Total Community Buy-in”** on emergency planning.

Consider hiring a **F/T Emergency Manager/Leader**.

Work on getting all **electrical underground**.

Push the County to take the lead on emergency planning for the entire County. **Cities can’t do it all on their own.**

Be sure that any plan **incorporates the needs of those less mobile** in the community (University students without cars, seniors and disabled). Plan for **evacuation of pets**.

Continue to fight for **better mental health resources**. Lack of services and support results in more homelessness and risk to the community.

Don’t overuse Nixle for non-emergency communication it will lose its effectiveness.



We can always improve on planning and emergency preparedness...

I cannot express my gratitude enough for the Police, Fire, Public Works, Parks and others who jumped in and saved lives. **Difficult decisions were made that day by first responders and lives were saved because of their efforts.**

Next Steps:

- ▶ **Coordinate with Jackson County EOC on regional After-Action Report**
- ▶ **Compile and Present Ashland After-Action Review Final Report**
- ▶ **Complete Evacuation Study and Implement Recommendations**