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Failed emergency alerts raise questions for future

Whitney Woodworth

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Just after midnight on Sept. 8, Jaime Baker was roused from her sleep — not by the wildfire raging through the Santiam Canyon toward her home in Mill City or a cell phone alert telling her to evacuate — but by strangers talking outside.

She heard a commotion, discovered the power was out and went out to see why people were yelling in the street.

Outside, the sky blazed a bright orange, the wind whipped around her and trees crashed down.

"What got me what how bright orange the sky was," she said. "It was like daytime."

A Level 3 "go now" evacuation notice had been issued at about midnight for much of the Santiam Canyon, including Mill City, Gates, Detroit and the North

Fork corridor.

Baker had no idea. She never received a phone call or alert. No one knocked on her door, and she didn't hear the town's emergency siren blare.

She decided on her own that it was time to leave.

Other residents found themselves in the same situation that night, leaving many to wonder what went wrong with the state and local emergency alert systems they thought would protect them during a disaster.

Weeks later, there are still more questions than answers about why evacuation orders weren't issued sooner, why emergency plans didn't account for power and internet outages, why cell phones didn't wake residents in the night with blaring alerts, and how the system will be improved before there's another disaster in the state.

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Kraig Arndt of Mill City takes photos Sept. 9 of a friend's home that burned to the ground during the Santiam Fire in Mill City.

ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL



The Detroit Dam was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Willamette Valley and began operating in 1953. DAVID DAVIS AND KELLY JORDAN / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Timber town now a 'war zone' after fire

Detroit grapples with immense loss after historic wildfires

Adrienne Roberts

Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

Steve Galbraith always dreamed of owning a home in Detroit.

Born and raised there, he moved away a handful of times, a few years each stint. He always knew he'd be back. His ties to Detroit run deep — his father moved to the city for a job in the forest service. Galbraith eventually got a job there, too.

"He liked to cut trees," said Galbraith, 58, laughing. Following his father's lead, Galbraith bought his own piece of land when he was just 29, and lived on the property since. Eventually, he saved enough money to build his dream house, and moved into it in 2012.

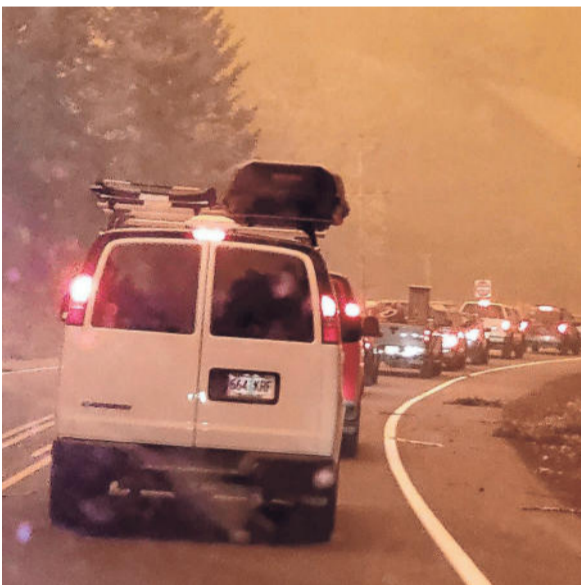
Galbraith took pride in his house. He called it the museum of Detroit, filled with items passed along through generations. It was tucked away in the woods.

"I was just starting to really enjoy it," he said.

When he wasn't working, he'd take his 1940 military-green Chevy pickup, what he calls the "Green Machine," out for a cruise into town, picking up whoever wanted to come along for a ride.

Now, the truck is one of the only possessions he

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The view of a caravan of evacuees from the vehicle of Travis and Jane James as they evacuated the Beachie Creek fire from Detroit, Oregon in the early morning hours of September 8, 2020. They were among a group of 78 people who had gathered at the Mongold boat ramp to escape the intense fire. Firefighters moved the trucks around the people and the water to try to keep them safe because roads were impassable due to the fire. Fire crews managed to clear a road long enough to get the group out. They had to drive north out of the area and through the intensifying fire to safety. JANE JAMES

Wildfires could impact water quality for a decade

Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The electronics in the building melted, the filtering system collapsed and the water storage was rendered useless.

As the Lionshead Fire ripped through Detroit Sept. 7, it not only destroyed about 250 homes and businesses, it destroyed one of the most vital pieces of it or any city — the water treatment plant.

For residents to return to their houses, buildings to be rebuilt, surviving businesses to be reopened and future fires to be fought, Detroit will have to do some-

thing about providing water to people again.

"I'm one of those fortunate standing in a row of nine homes up there on Clester, but there is no water," said Detroit resident and Marion County Commissioner Kevin Cameron. "If I'm even allowed to go back, this is DEQ stuff we got to talk about."

Detroit is surrounded by Detroit Lake and draws its water from Breitenbush Creek, but all that water doesn't do much good if it can't get to homes and businesses.

New water filtration systems installed in Gates and Idanha in the past few years cost over \$1 million, and

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Great-grandma celebrates 85th with rock wall climb

Capi Lynn

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Mary Ann Johnson is an "American Ninja Warrior" fan, riveted by the TV series featuring a race through daunting obstacle courses.

She's noticed a common theme among competitors.

"All the ones that are really, really good — or a lot of them anyway — have been climbing rock walls," Johnson said. "The thing is, I can hardly climb a ladder."

The 85-year-old great-grandmother may not be ready for a ninja audition, but she can now do both.

She surprised family and friends at her Sept. 16 birthday party by climbing to the top of the indoor rock wall at the Kroc Center in Salem.

A few were in on her secret. She'd been getting private lessons for months.

Still learning new things

Johnson reached her goal despite a few snags, including not being able to access the wall for nearly three months because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then her party nearly had to be canceled when the Kroc Center closed for a few days because of hazardous air quality from the wildfires.

"With all that's going on and all the people who have such devastating things happen, I think my birthday is sounding kind of unimportant," she told the Statesman Journal.

Others might argue an inspirational, feel-good story like hers is exactly what we all need.

Even before hundreds of families lost their homes in the Beachie Creek Fire, though, she was apprehensive about publicly sharing her climbing quest.

"I just don't want anyone to think I'm showing off," Johnson said.

She should be proud, shouting it from the peak of the 33-foot-tall wall.

Johnson credits her supporting cast for making it possible, including friend Sally Newkirk, who gave her a ride to lessons because she doesn't drive, and instructor Tim Carr, who gave her the tools and confidence to reach the top.

They've both followed her journey in awe.

"She's one of those people if she's got her mind set on it, she's going to work until she drops," Newkirk said. "I don't think she's ever been discouraged."

Carr said there were times he became the student.

"She's taught me a few things, how you can grow older and still enjoy life and try new things," he said. "You hear how people who are growing older start to do less and think less is possible, but her whole attitude is 'Well, now what else can I do.'"

'I want to do that'

Johnson, who's lived in Salem since she was 7, wanted to improve her health. She has kyphosis, a curvature of the spine that results in an abnormal rounding of the upper back. It's often caused by osteoporosis in older women. Her mother had it.

She originally joined the Kroc Center to swim. But the first time she and Newkirk walked into the lobby, Johnson was lured by the rock wall.

"I thought, 'I want to do that,'" she said. "I wasn't sure they would let me because of my age, but they've just been as good as you can possibly be to make it

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Mary Ann Johnson, 84, practices climbing the rock wall with her trainer Tim Carr on Aug. 25 at the Kroc Center in Salem. Johnson, who recently turned 85 years old, made it her goal to climb the wall for her birthday. ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

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