

drive smart: Clear the Way

You've seen the road signs but what exactly is a Disaster Response Route?



IMAGINE A 7.9-MAGNITUDE EARTHQUAKE has hit Greater Vancouver and first responders – fire trucks, ambulances and police cars – race down key thoroughfares en route to the catastrophe. They're called Disaster Response Routes, or DRRs, and you've seen the signs posted along major roads and highways on your daily commute. Many motorists think these signs mark evacuation routes, but in fact they're pre-identified routes for disaster responders and suppliers.

If an earthquake, flood, toxic spill or any other man-made or natural disaster were to strike, these roads become priority expressways for emergency vehicles, goods and services. Should this happen, it's not good enough to pull over; you need to get off the road and find an alternate route.

"If you're on the route when you shouldn't be on the route, you're preventing people from getting the help they need," says Heather Lyle, Director of Integrated Public Safety at Emergency Management BC.

Metro Vancouver is crisscrossed with Disaster Response Routes, and Vancouver Island's Capital Region also has them. (For a complete list and map of designated DRRs, visit the B.C. Ministry of Transportation and Information website at gov.bc.ca/tran/) The process is simple: in case of an emergency, the provincial transportation ministry and the

various municipalities that maintain these routes have the power to turn ordinary roads into emergency routes using radio bulletins and electronic message boards to clear the way and get vehicles off the highway. Other municipalities may get involved depending upon the severity of the situation.

"That's not to say every DRR is going to be activated," says Lyle. "Motorists may be able to travel along the route perfectly fine if it's not being used to support the emergency event in question."

But what if you're already on a DRR unaware of what's happening? Well, for one thing, no one's going to chase you with sirens blaring. "We will not be using the police to [enforce] the DRRs because that's not the best use of our police officers," says Lyle. Instead, motorists are likely to see barricades manned by public works, local parks and recreation or other support staff who will help guide vehicles off the roadway.

When DRRs were introduced to Vancouver in 1995, they were the first of their kind in the world. In 2005, the concept was expanded to include rail, air and marine resources should the roads become impassable. This multi-modal approach now includes 65 marine muster points, primarily along the Fraser River, where responders can meet for dispersal and, if necessary, unload supplies from barges or boats. "We look at

Everyday roads around B.C. have been designated as Disaster Response Routes.

them as roll-on/roll-off points," says Lyle.

The DRR network has never been fully tested – fortunately, we've never had a large enough disaster – but parts of it have been utilized. In 2010, severe flooding blocked Highway 20 and isolated the northern community of Bella Coola. Emergency Management BC went into multi-modal mode, hiring a helicopter to move pre-fabricated Bailey bridges into place and chartering three BC Ferries. "We were moving commercial vehicles and even RVs out of the Bella Coola Valley on barge and flying people down to Vancouver," recalls Mike Andrews, who was the provincial lead at the time and now heads the North Shore Emergency Management office.

In 2008, water taxis and helicopters were used to cope with a major rockslide on the Sea to Sky highway. Disaster Response Routes are a work in progress and the province is looking at extending the program into other parts of B.C. But, as Andrews points out, emergency principles can be applied anywhere, anytime: "Anything's a disaster response route in a disaster if you need it to be." ■

—John Thomson

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

In the event of a local disaster, do you know what to do? Here are some basic tips:

Stay put. If you're not already on the road, do not get in your car and drive. You do not want to clog the roads. Get informed through radio and television bulletins, DriveBC and Emergency Management BC websites.

Stay calm. If you're already in your car, listen for bulletins on road closures and alternate routes. If you're on a DRR, get off at the next interchange.

Stay safe. Be ready for any calamity, anytime, anywhere. Always travel with a fully charged phone and charger, flashlight, emergency and first-aid kit, blanket, warm clothes, gloves and sturdy shoes for walking through debris if need be. A supply of food and water is also a good precaution. □ —JJ.