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Firefighters' lives were at undue risk: Austin Fire Association President

One of those recommendations will come from Austin Fire Association's President Bob Nicks. He was a fire vehicle driver in the 1991 Dove Creek floods. He said responders then could have used more rescue boats, and the story was the same last fall in Onion Creek.

In his role as union president, Nicks said he was the Incident Commander for the Pinehurst Command the morning of Oct. 31.

Rising waters had already flooded out at least one Austin Police patrol car and damaged several others. That prompted incident commanders in four separate areas of South Austin to tell responding police officers to stay put since the dangerous waters were unpredictable and filled with debris.

Nicks told KXAN as he arrived on scene, Onion Creek waters covering streets and lawns had already cut him off from three of his rescue crews. He called for boats. He would not receive any for more than two hours since they were being used at larger flood scenes elsewhere.

"Having boats on scene would have been a big comfort to me as Incident Commander," said Nicks. "The troubling thing is [those crews] were cut off, and if the water was to rise, like some of our intelligence was showing, it would have been pretty dire."

Fortunately, the water did not rise above most single story rooftops in Onion Creek neighborhoods before receding later that morning. Austin Fire Rescue crews made 380 water rescues. HSEM Incident Reports show some of those were made with high-clearance dump trucks borrowed from Travis County.

Some people would wait five to six hours to be plucked off their rooftops or vehicle beds.

Hours earlier, before midnight on Oct. 30, Austin fire resources were directed to Pflugerville where 34 people were evacuated from flooding property, including 10 by boat.

AFD's total rescue number does not include several dozen others made by responding [Texas Game Wardens](#) – an under recognized arm of the state's Parks & Wildlife Department who underwent updated swift water rescue training as recently as August. ([ATCEMS Swift Water Instructions](#) - requires .pdf reader)

Game Wardens with hoist training also worked with DPS helicopter crews in Hays, Caldwell and Guadalupe counties on rescue response and operations, including the search and recovery of deceased victims, officials said.

“Look, man, the water's coming up real quick. I don't know if we need the helicopter or what,” one caller in the Pinehurst neighborhood told 911.

[Star Flight](#) helicopter crews plucked 32 people and four dogs from the high water that day, according to [Travis County records](#). While AFD's Bob Nicks applauds the helicopters' abilities to get people out of the highest-risk situations like trees or cars, he said rigid-hull inflatable rescue boats are more effective at helping more people due to being small and agile.

Planning for next time

Austin Fire Department has four swift-water rescue boats. Each was bought in 2008, and in early January this year, they were repositioned around the city for quicker access to flood prone areas, like Onion Creek, and Bull Creek in Northwest Austin.

These changes will be laid out in a comprehensive report the Austin Fire Department is finalizing into the reorganization of its Special Operations Unit. It's due out in February. The report was commissioned in August, before the Halloween floods.

Fire department records show in fiscal year 2014, its Special Operations Unit intends to spend \$35,000 on new equipment and \$20,000 on training. For the Fire Association president, the 'Spec Ops' report and new money could be the very light at the end of the tunnel he's hoping for.

“There were thousands of things that went right,” Bob Nicks said. “But what we didn’t have were more resources [boats] and trained operators.”

Nicks’ point is driven home by the story of the father and his two grown sons who went out on their own to rescue dozens of their Onion Creek neighbors. They used two small boats of their own and were recognized as heroes last year by Austin Police.

Christian Martinez told KXAN’s Angie Beavin, “I didn’t want to see people suffer. I didn’t even think about it. We were here to help people,” he said.

Nicks also suggests longer term, Austin Fire adopt a similar approach to readying for floods as the department now does for wildfires.

When the forecast calls for violent weather and goes under a National Weather Service ‘red flag’ warning, trained AFD crews are staged in strategic areas with appropriate equipment like brush trucks that can go off road. The same, he says, could be done when heavy flooding is a possibility, like staging water rescue boats in low lying areas.