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Marvil aims to improve emergency preparedness

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SHARPSBURG

What began as a 4-H service project has branched out into a multipronged effort to improve emergency preparedness in Sharpsburg for 18-year-old Seth Marvil, who presented his work to the Sharpsburg Town Council this month.

Marvil's efforts over the past year have included creating digital maps for emergency responders, surveying officials about the town's emergency preparedness tools, handing out emergency survival kits to seniors and even completing Citizen Emergency Response Training so he is prepared to assist rescue crews in an emergency.

"Overall, I'm sure it's reached about 1,000 hours," said Marvil, who has submitted the project for consideration for the Diamond Clover Award, the highest 4-H honor in Maryland. Already, his work was awarded first place reserve grand champion in its category at the Maryland State Fair, and Marvil was selected to make a presentation to extension educators at a national conference this spring.

Marvil said he became interested in emergency preparedness in the spring of 2007, when he saw a presentation about the Alert, Evacuate and Shelter Project, a national program developed by 4-H's Community Readiness Network in partnership with National Geographic, the University of Nevada, the Education Disaster Network and other organizations.

In the summer of 2007, Marvil and his parents participated in a training program at the University of Maryland, where they learned how to use Global Positioning System (GPS) units to collect data for mapping and Geographic Information System (GIS) software to layer those data points onto digital maps. Marvil was provided with his own handheld GPS unit and GIS software through a grant from mapping software company ESRI.

In one of the most time-consuming aspects of the project, the Marvils walked all over Sharpsburg, digitally collecting the coordinates of landmarks such as fire hydrants, transformer poles, historic

homes, churches and cemeteries. Marvil then used the data to build digital maps that fire and rescue officials can use to respond to emergencies. The departments currently rely on outdated physical maps to locate many of these features, he said.

Before the Sharpsburg Volunteer Fire Co. can begin using Marvil's maps, the company will have to upgrade to faster computers, he said. That was one of several needs Marvil identified based on the results of the readiness inventory survey, he said. The survey also revealed the town's fire and rescue companies would like to see a local citizen emergency response team, said his mother, Mary Ann Marvil.

Despite the hours involved, Marvil said he enjoyed working on the project and plans to continue working to improve emergency preparedness in the region.

"I know it will probably help save people," he said. "Maybe not now, but it's nice to know that we have it."