



# City of San Antonio

## Agenda Memorandum

**File Number:**17-2806

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**Agenda Item Number:** 4.

**Agenda Date:** 4/18/2017

**In Control:** Criminal Justice, Public Safety and Services Committee

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**DEPARTMENT:** Fire

**DEPARTMENT HEAD:** Charles N. Hood

**COUNCIL DISTRICTS IMPACTED:** City-Wide

### **SUBJECT:**

Review of Emergency Notifications

### **SUMMARY:**

Citizens voiced their concerns through local media outlets and City leadership about the need for tornado sirens following the February 19<sup>th</sup> tornado event. The San Antonio Office of Emergency Management (SAOEM) initiated a review of current available emergency notifications.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

On February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017 the NWS issued tornado warnings for the San Antonio /Bexar County viewing area. After the initial impact had passed it was determined that 4 tornados (3 within the City of San Antonio) had touched down. The San Antonio Office of Emergency Management (SAOEM) then initiated a review of the Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA) and the COSA Hazard Mitigation Plan, which resulted in the formation of a committee to update the 2012 tornado sirens study.

The committee consisted of the following agencies; San Antonio Fire Department, San Antonio Police Department, San Antonio Office of Emergency Management, Bexar County Office of Emergency Management, National Weather Service, Development Services Department, Aviation, Transportation and Capital Improvement, and Sustainability.

This ad hoc committee met 4 times since the tornado events. Upon receiving regular briefings from the National Weather Service, they engaged in discussions about San Antonio's tornado history, future emergency

planning updates, and emergency alerting best practices. Finally, the committee concluded that the installation of tornado sirens would not substantially improve public safety over the widespread use of smart phone applications and other forms of public alerting.

## **ISSUE:**

Public safety during severe weather events depends on how quickly citizens receive emergency information. Through the widespread use of the National Weather Service Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system, and other smartphone weather applications, this period of time is substantially decreased, allowing the public to make critical decisions about their safety. With regards to tornado safety, it is recommended that once a tornado warning is received people should remain in-doors until the storm passes.

With the improvement of alerting technology, mobile devices and smart phones serve as a primary notification device for citizens. The use of widespread WEA alerts by enabling smart phones to receive notifications is the best way to receive up to the minute severe weather warnings. Since citizens should have multiple forms of emergency notification, there are also several smart phone apps that send similar public alerts during severe weather. Examples include weather.com, mystateusa.net, stormnow.com, accuweather.com, wunderground.com, and weatherbug.com to name a few.

## **ALTERNATIVES:**

The City Council could approve the installation of tornado sirens throughout the City. The installation of city-wide sirens would require between a \$4 and \$7 million dollar investment with annual maintenance costs of approximately \$215 thousand dollars. Furthermore, sirens are not effective for warning people in-doors or in vehicles and do not operate effectively with little to no lead time, as is the case with most tornadoes experienced in our community.

## **FISCAL IMPACT:**

The continued use of smart phone applications along with widespread use of the National Weather Service Wireless Emergency Alerting system does not create a fiscal impact. The San Antonio Office of Emergency Management's Ready South Texas application costs \$5,000 annually to operate.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

The Office of Emergency Management recommends the use of Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) which are emergency messages sent by authorized government alerting authorities through your mobile carrier. Government partners include local and state public safety agencies, FEMA, the FCC, the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Weather Service. No sign-up is required. Alerts are sent automatically to WEA-capable phones during an emergency.

Additionally, the City of San Antonio has recently implemented the Ready South Texas application (<http://readysouthtexasapp.com>) which helps citizens create an all hazard plan for their families and can be

used to receive critical emergency alerts via push notifications.