

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Tom Harmer, Town Manager
From: Paul B. Dezzi, Fire Chief
Report date: May 19, 2020
Meeting date: September 14, 2020
Subject: Town's Emergency Notification System

Recommended Action

Continue utilization of the current platforms for emergency notification of the public.

Background

In times of crisis, the residents of Longboat Key continually demonstrate resilience. A true example of this is the COVID-19 Pandemic. Timely and effective emergency alert and warning messages can add to that resilience by providing information that citizens (residents) can use to make informed decisions and act to save lives and reduce property loss.

Receiving timely information about weather conditions and other emergency events can make a difference when to take protective measures to be safe. The Town of Longboat Key strives to improve public safety through the rapid dissemination of emergency messages to as many people as possible over as many devices as possible before, during, and after a disaster. This has been proven during Hurricane Irma with the messaging that was initiated through Code Red, www.longboatkey.org website, and conference calls with several stakeholder groups and property management groups.

The implementation of Integrated Public Alert and Warning Systems (IPAWS) to augment existing public alert and warning technologies has vastly improved citizen awareness. The Town of Longboat Key continues to work with Sarasota County to leverage IPAWS' capabilities to expand the delivery of alert and warning information, increase resilience of local systems, as well as support the mission of the Town of Longboat Key Emergency Management to provide protection, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts.

On May 1, 2020 the Town of Longboat Key transitioned from the previous emergency alert system, CodeRED, to Everbridge, also known as Alert Longboat Key. This new emergency notification system is being used in 65 of the 67 Florida counties, and a vast majority of municipalities, providing timely emergency alerts for residents who signed up for the service. Everbridge has contracted with the State of Florida whereby the State has offered all counties the service for free through 2024. Alert Longboat Key is free to residents, and allows public safety officials to notify residents of local emergencies such as a hazardous materials incident, road and bridge closures, law enforcement advisories, and severe

weather incidents (hurricane, tornado, tsunami, tropical storm and storm surge warnings) issued by the National Weather Service. The National Weather Service (NWS) alerts, for those severe weather events are launched directly by the NWS to the affected area without any action by the Town.

Everbridge utilizes a public database to populate the system and periodically updates it. The Town also transferred 7247 contacts from the CodeRED database to ensure we captured data for all those previously registered with CodeRED. We have also widely publicized the transition and encouraged residents to register, or call to update their contact information. The system currently has 15,161 total contacts registered. This includes manual registrations (56), web registration (658), residential landlines (4848), residential wireless devices (1584), business landlines (556), Town employees, and business wireless devices (76). Residents can register as many phones, emails, text messaging options as needed in an attempt to ensure the timeliest delivery of emergency messages.

To work effectively, Alert Longboat Key is only as good as the information available and provided by the recipient or resident. Keeping the contact information current is essential.

The Town of Longboat Key encourages residents to use multiple communication tools to better prepare for disasters before they happen. During an emergency, staying advised of weather reports and information from the Town of Longboat Key is essential for the safety of the public.

The Town of Longboat Key takes safety of the public seriously and utilizes a broad and multi-faceted approach to emergency. The strategies include:

- **Emergency Notification** Alert Longboat Key: Residents that are not signed up for this are encouraged to do so by visiting www.longboatkey.org or they may call or e-mail Assistant to Town Manager, Susan Phillips who can assist with registrations. 941-316-1999 x 1212 or sphillips@longboatkey.org
- **Emergency Notification** NOAA Weather Radio: Battery powered with tone alert for home use. During an emergency, the weather service forecasters interrupt routine broadcasts and send a special tone activating local weather radios. Weather radios equipped with a special alarm tone feature sound an alert to give immediate information about a life-threatening situation.
- **Emergency Notification Device** Cell Phone Apps: The Town of Longboat Key supports emergency applications such as Everbridge whereby residents can receive all emergency notifications in a timely manner. Local television stations have weather applications that provide a daily weather forecast as well as alerts for immediate severe weather conditions/changes. Cell phones can accept text messages, automated voice messages, email messages, social media messages all of which provide alerts and guidance to residents.
- **Emergency Updates** Social Media: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are all applications used by the Town to push out emergency information.
- **Emergency Updates** Town of Longboat Key Website: www.longboatkey.org provides updated information on emergencies that

affect the Town. During an emergency, this site is updated frequently to provide residents with important information.

- **Emergency Updates** Radio: Local radio stations broadcast updates to keep the public informed. This is especially important during a severe weather event.
- **Emergency Updates** Television: Local television station affiliates as well as local government channels provide information during emergencies. The local ABC affiliate WWSB-TV would provide the best local updates.
- **Emergency Updates** Newspaper: The Town of Longboat Key has two newspapers but they are not daily information rather weekly. These papers provide information but if residents are looking for daily information they should seek the Herald Tribune of Manatee and Sarasota County.

When an unexpected weather emergency, security advisory or a health alert is encountered within the Town of Longboat Key, the Town wants to be ready to communicate quickly, effectively, accurately and intelligently in order to contain the situation, limit miscommunication, and lead our citizens responsibly. The Emergency Management Team is confident that citizens/residents will be kept informed and safe with the use of the above.

Communication is vital in any emergency and having a communication plan that includes effective mass emergency messaging (via multiple platforms) is key to efficient emergency management efforts.

Our mobile home parks are an area especially vulnerable to severe weather emergencies such as a tornado, storm surge, and high wind events. We have specifically reached out to those properties to make sure they are registered for our emergency notification system and to also encourage them to utilize weather alert radios.

As the Town of Longboat Key's Emergency Manager, I utilize best practices in our communication efforts during an emergency. As mentioned, the Town takes advantage of automated voice messages, email, text, social media postings, website, NWS use of polygons for specific notifications (prevents over-warning), and mass notification.

As the Town continues to look for ways to enhance public notification outdoor sirens and their effectiveness in today's modern technology have also been considered.

A civil defense siren (also known as an air-raid siren or tornado siren) is a siren used to provide warning of approaching danger and sometimes to indicate when the danger has passed. Initially designed to warn of air raids in World War II, they were adapted to warn of nuclear attack and of natural destructive weather patterns such as tornados. The generalized nature of the siren led to many of them being replaced with more specialized warnings, such as the Emergency Alert System or EAS.

In the days before the internet, smart phones, and auto-activating weather radios, communities across the Country repurposed their wartime air raid sirens

for tornado alerts. These systems allowed people who were outside to run for shelter before the storm arrived. That is the key; they're designed for people who are outside. You are not meant to hear tornado sirens indoors, especially today, when homes and businesses are able to muffle sound better than they were half a century ago. This is especially true on Longboat Key with hurricane rated windows and enclosures. There are millions of people across this Country putting their lives on the line by listening for a sound they cannot hear.

After the 2016 tornado that damaged property on Siesta Key and claimed two lives in Eastern Manatee County there were many asking questions to local Emergency Managers as to why tornado sirens are not available.

Both Emergency Managers in Manatee and Sarasota County preach the importance of having a National Weather Service (NWS) radio in the home so that if a storm approaches it will provide an alert. As well as the importance of registering with an emergency alerting system such as Alert Longboat Key (Everbridge) and finally having a weather app on your smart phone. The new and evolving technology is providing better and more timely communication to the public on severe weather than ever before.

Outdoor sirens have communication/messaging limitations (sirens convey sound but no specifics as far as what the problem is, where to go, or when it's safe or clear to resume normal activity).

Sirens are not designed to alert residents that are inside nor are they designed to alert persons with a hearing impairment who are some of Longboat Key's most vulnerable residents.

As the Town's Emergency Manager, I reached out to several emergency management and weather professionals to get their insight in the use of outside sirens. Below are their comments:

Steve Litschauer, Manatee County Emergency Manager Chief states, "Manatee County does not use tornado sirens nor is there any plans in the future to use tornado sirens. To be effective you must have 24/7 coverage to monitor and operate them. With so many new technologies including weather radios, IPAWS alerts and numerous smart phone applications, we believe those new technologies can better serve the public than that of the sirens."

Paul Dellegatto, Chief Meteorologist with FOX13 shares, "I am not a big fan of tornado sirens in Florida. We simply do not have enough tornadic activity to warrant the expense of properly installing tornado sirens throughout a community. The money spent could instead be used to promote the importance of receiving severe weather warnings via a NOAA weather radio or a weather app. In this day and age, everyone has a weather app, and if people don't, they should. It's how we communicate. If we were in tornado alley the expense may make sense. Here in Florida, education and promoting weather radio and weather apps makes more sense. Once again, this is just my personal opinion. It may be worth your time to reach out to the NWS office in Ruskin for their opinion."

Dan Noah, Warning Coordination Meteorologist with the National Weather Service, Tampa Bay states:

“Outdoor warning system only”

“Hard to hear inside”

“Expensive to install and maintain”

“Liability if siren doesn't go off during a warning and someone is hurt”

Bob Harrigan, Chief Meteorologist with WWSB-TV states, “They would be OK but in reality, our tornadoes are so fast and are on the ground for just a short period of time that they don't make a lot of sense on top of that I heard the maintenance is tough due to the salt water.”

Ed McCrane, Sarasota County Emergency Management Chief states:

“In the days before the internet, smartphones, and auto-activating weather radios, communities across the Country repurposed their wartime air raid sirens for tornado alerts. These systems allowed people who were outside to run for shelter before the storm arrived and caught them away in the fields. They were designed for people who are *outside* so they could get indoors and into the cellar or into the safe area inside their homes. It is very difficult to hear tornado sirens indoors, especially today in Florida, when homes and businesses are able to muffle sound better than they were half a century ago.

Here are just a few reasons tornado sirens are not suited for use in Florida:

- Salt air in coastal areas will cause the sirens to rust and need replacement often
- Sirens need a power source with a battery back up
- Sirens are expensive and depending on the type can be \$20,000 or more each
- Sirens need regular maintenance and testing
- Sirens would have to be monitored 24/7 in order to be activated when needed
- The person responsible for the siren would have a way to get the warning from the Tampa Bay National Weather Service in Ruskin.
- In order to be heard by all a siren would have to be placed every quarter mile and
- If a tornado hit and the siren did not work or alert people, the Town could possibly be held liable.

The National Weather Service broadcasts forecasts and warnings from radio antennas that cover nearly every square inch of the United States, and specially-designed weather radios can decode these signals and sound a loud tone when a severe weather watch or warning is issued for your county. Weather radios are smoke detectors for the weather, and they should be just as common in homes, schools, and business. These devices save lives—much more than tornado sirens ever could—and they're especially useful for households that don't have smartphones with wireless emergency alert capabilities.

The wireless Emergency Alerts provide the following types of alerts: Imminent Threat Alerts that include extreme weather, and other threatening emergencies in your area

- Public Safety Alerts that are less severe in nature than Imminent Threat Alerts
- AMBER Alerts
- Presidential Alerts during a national emergency

Craig Fugate: Former FEMA Director states:

“With today’s home insulation, hard to hear at night over the AC. Cell phone Wireless Emergency Alerts reach most people day and night. Also, sirens have limitations, lack of compliance under ADA for deaf and hard of hearing. Unless you get an outdoor speaker system, other than making noise, what’s the emergency?”

In summary, the information obtained and the contacts that were made regarding this topic, I have concluded that “outdoor sirens” may be useful in some very specific cases such as beaches and parks where people may not have their mobile devices readily available. However, literature highlights a number of pitfalls of using sirens, including unrealistic societal dependence on them, desensitization towards them, sound-limiting geographic factors such as wind direction and varying topography, ineffectiveness in elderly and hearing-impaired populations, and the fact that sirens are designed to be heard only in outdoor settings. Not to mention building Codes and the insurance industry have been more stringent by requiring hurricane windows, shutters, and other weather-related items that dampen sound for protection of the structure and occupants.

In closing, with the evolving changes in technology, and better reliability with forecasting, I would recommend the Town continue promoting the weather applications including Alert Longboat Key so residents have access on their personal mobile devices. We will continue to work with media outlets, property managers, and use mailers to enhance the promotion and education of the importance of mobile device weather applications including the purchase of a NWS radio that residents should have in their home. The NWS radio should be considered a lifesaver for weather alerts just as a smoke detector is for smoke in fires.

Staff Recommendation

Continue utilization of the current platforms for emergency notification of the public

Attachments

PowerPoint Presentation (Available in Town Clerk’s Office)

End of Agenda Item