



Community Environmental Advisory Commission

ACTION CALENDAR  
December 17, 2013

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: Community Environmental Advisory Commission  
Submitted by: Max Gomberg, Acting Chairperson, CEAC  
Subject: Chevron Refinery Fire Follow-Up: Emergency Public Information and Warning

RECOMMENDATION

Direct the City Manager to:

1. To prepare a report over the next three to six months on the best fast, timely, flexible city-wide or section-wide notification of emergencies and submit the report to Community Environmental Advisory Commission (CEAC) and Disaster and Fire Safety Commission (DFSC) to get their final input on recommendations to the Council for implementing;
2. Immediately ensure that all nearby governmental warning agencies including FEMA have or will adopt specific methods for (a) timely contact with Berkeley officials to warn of incidents such as fire or release of toxic smoke or chemicals that might endanger Berkeley residents and (b) frequent (such as hourly) ongoing updates as long as the danger persists;
3. Contact major chemical (including petroleum) facilities within a radius of the City determined by the BAAQMD that can impact air quality and/or seriously harm one or more people located in the City of Berkeley, and ask them to reply on their plans for 24/7 warning City emergency responders as to releases or threatened releases of toxics, and then report to CEAC and the Council as to compliance or the lack;
4. Make sure local, reliable, real-time meteorological data from sites not blocked or affected by nearby structures is available 24/7 for emergency responders and on the City website; if these do not exist, then invest in small-scale internet connected units that can be sited around the city.

FISCAL IMPACT OF RECOMMENDATION

Not determined but staff time will be needed over a 3-6 month period to evaluate best emergency outreach methods available and to contact nearby jurisdictions and facilities.

### CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

The City has no robust citywide public notification system. The City relies on Berkeley Emergency Notification System and media outreach, both of which can be too slow and too spotty in their reach

The City relies on notification by California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) for notifications of emergency spills, but this does not cover industrial fires in many cases. Notification to CalOES and then to impacted agencies wastes much time before City is able to respond. Neighboring agencies have mutual aid with Berkeley emergency responders but that does not necessarily include notification to the City on smoke impacts to the City of Berkeley.

On September 5, 2013, the Community Environmental Advisory Commission voted to approve this recommendation to Council on City Emergency Procedures in Response to Chevron Fire Recommendation: Action: Motioned/Seconded/Carried (Gomberg/August). Votes: Ayes: August, Gomberg, Goldhaber, Lim, Plummer, Magoffna, Torkelson. Noes: None. Absent: None. Abstain: None.

### BACKGROUND

Compared with many other cities, Berkeley is relatively safe from industrial pollution or toxic emissions. The largest fixed hazard is certainly the Richmond Chevron facility, and the prevailing winds from there are not directed towards Berkeley. However, relative safety is not absolute; the wind does not always blow in prevailing directions. Accidents involving trucks or trains that carrying toxics pass through the city are possible, and shipping accidents in the Bay do occur as well. (The latter would be handled by the Coast Guard, which, up to now, has a very good response record, though the dangers and likely responses for water or wind-borne Bay incidents need better evaluation.) Smaller, possibly unknown industrial facilities here or in neighboring cities pose hard-to-gauge risks, and terrorist acts cannot be ruled out.

Further the widely known, considerable risks of wide-scale fire or serious earthquake certainly justify adequate precautions including emergency alert systems. Recent developments in very-short-timescale earthquake predictions (up to one minute in advance of a quake being felt) could, if tied to an appropriate alarm system, save many lives.

Unfortunately, as our study of the 2012 Chevron event revealed, there is no effective set of agreements in place to assure that Berkeley be notified of hazards. It was only the happenstance that Chevron's own fire department chose to ask for the loan of equipment that Berkeley became officially aware of the blaze at the plant. It was only by chance that a Berkeley official was in a position to monitor the direction of the smoke plume, since the fire occurred on a clear day in daylight, and the official happened to be high in the hills. There is no method currently in use by the city to determine wind direction reliably in all circumstances.

Finally, had the Chevron fire's smoke plume been headed towards Berkeley, possibly endangering a substantial portion of the city, there would have been no effective way to issue an alert to most residents endangered. Berkeley has no stationary siren or klaxon system. The Berkeley Emergency Notification System, or BENS, utilizes phone lines that can't handle the volume of calls needed to inform any substantial portion of town in a timely enough way. The city urgently requires a more effective alert system. Such a system, if properly designed, could handle other types of emergency as well. Choosing and implementing a more effective system seems well within the capacity of the city government.

The October 7 explosion on the UC Berkeley campus specifically illustrated the lack of an adequate City notification system and communication with neighboring entities. Shortly after the fire, Campus siren systems broadcasted voice announcements about the fire and evacuation. In addition, many students received text messages warning them to avoid campus. Updates on the status of the explosion and subsequent fire were both emailed to students and posted to the UC Berkeley website. Although the UC warned students to avoid campus and its perimeter, no such warnings were given to the surrounding non-student community. These events demonstrate a more effective system of warning than what the City currently maintains and also demonstrates the need for the City to communicate with neighboring entities to properly inform community members who may possibly be affected.

#### RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The dangers from possible toxic emissions, though not high, are too large to be neglected. The absence of clear agreements with other governmental entities such as the Contra Costa and Alameda County Health Departments for timely notification to Berkeley should be remedied. We must have a robust and timely emergency alert system capable of warning of earthquake, fire and toxic hazards alike. Berkeley citizens deserve no less.

#### ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED

CEAC considered specific notification systems as stationary sirens (klaxons) but determined that staff was better positioned to report back on appropriate technology and other solutions.

#### CITY MANAGER

See companion report.

#### CONTACT PERSON

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