



Community Health Commission

ACTION CALENDAR

December 17, 2013

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Community Health Commission

Submitted by: Linda Franklin, Chairperson

Subject: City Council Referral on the Impact of the Richmond Fire of August 21, 2012 on Berkeley Residents

RECOMMENDATION

Direct the City Manager to convene a task force within the next three months, comprised of leaders from the various emergency agencies within the City (Fire, Office of Emergency Services (OES), CERT leaders, and other like agencies) to assess, evaluate and make recommendations as to exactly how the citizenry of Berkeley will be effectively and systematically alerted in the event of emergencies, like toxic emissions, earthquakes or other natural or human-made disasters if and when it befalls the City.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

Undetermined but staff time is expected to be utilized to convene task force, evaluate results and make recommendations.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

At the Council meeting of October 12, 2012, Councilmember Capitelli requested that the Community Environmental Advisory Commission (CEAC) research the aftermath of the Chevron Refinery fire of August 21, 2012. The recommendation was later amended to include the Community Health Commission (CHC). The request centered primarily on finding out the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's (BAAQMD) response to, and communications with the City of Berkeley regarding its citizens' alert system.

While the directive was specifically asking about the BAAQMD's role – the subcommittee members of both the CEAC and the CHC ended up looking at several more agencies which we thought should naturally be responding to this type of situation, or emergencies in general.

BACKGROUND

The question of how exactly does the City of Berkeley respond to emergencies kept circling back in our discussion and research:

- a) What is the City's emergency response network?
- b) Who issues the alert?
- c) Who takes on the leadership of making sure all systems go when emergencies

- arise? and,
d) How exactly is the citizenry alerted?

During the Chevron fire, the Berkeley Fire Department learned of the disaster only because the Chevron Fire Department asked to borrow our Fire Department's foam dispensing equipment. It was also by chance that an off-duty City of Berkeley staff person observed the plume of smoke from the Berkeley hills and alerted the City. But that did not trigger activation of any kind of alert system since the plume from the fire was observed to be blowing away from Berkeley. No official alert system was issued or heard from within the City. But reports from some community members of smelling and experiencing some discomfort during and after the fire indicate that smoke particles were actually coming our way. As we looked further into this – we realized that there really is not an adequate system in place that will effectively and systematically alert our citizenry of emergency situations.

We found a limited emergency alert system between the existing emergency agencies within the City, like the Office of Emergency Services (OES), the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and other City departments that have their own alert systems (the Fire Department, the Public Health Department, and the Police Department). We concluded that there is no centralized, unified, emergency communication alert system in the City of Berkeley such that a chain reaction (a phone tree perhaps) of alerting every agency or department once an emergency situation is reported.

The Berkeley Emergency Notifications Systems (BENS) is supposed to serve as a mass notification system. BENS, however, cannot handle the volume of calls for a citywide alert, in a timely manner, because it operates mainly using a mass telephonic automated dialing service. Residents get included in the list if they have an AT&T service (one of several service providers for Berkeley residents) or, by voluntarily registering their phone number in this system. If one is not listed in this system, then the person is out of the loop.

The Office of Emergency Services (OES) and the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) are meant to respond to emergencies, but they are not geared towards alerting the citizenry when eminent danger or hazards are about to befall the City or certain sections of the City.

It is not clear how exactly the City departments that have their own alert systems, like the Fire Department, the Public Health department, and the Police Department will use their resources to coordinate a City-wide emergency alert system. Additionally, the University of California, Berkeley has its own separate system and is not necessarily obligated to alert the City of the emergencies it is dealing with.

This is obviously a problem. With all of these existing emergency response agencies, a

systematic, coordinated “chain reaction” of alerting each agency and the community should be triggered once a first alert is heard or issued. In addition to the absence of a centralized unified emergency communication alert system within the City of Berkeley, there are few (if any) agreements with entities which might have immediate knowledge of emergencies that could threaten the health or safety of Berkeley inhabitants.

Again, the recent fire at the Chevron facility is an example of this. Chevron did not alert Berkeley. Contra Costa County alerted Alameda County but what Alameda County did with the information is not clear. A unified emergency communication alert system should have been automatically set in motion to alert our community of the danger so they too could shelter in place, if it was called for.

Other examples of emergencies that could warrant an alert include; toxic emissions that could come from ship accidents on the bay, trucking accidents on I-80 or other land-based facilities, acts of terrorism, wildland urban-interface fires, or tsunami warnings. Recent developments in earthquake predictions indicate that very-short-timescale warnings (up to one minute in advance of a quake being felt) are promising and a unified, emergency communication system can make a significant difference.

At the regular meeting of the Community Health Commission on October 10, 2013 the following motion was approved.

M/S/C (Stein /Gibson) Motion: The CHC recommends that the City Council direct the City Manager to convene a task force within the next three months, comprised of leaders from the various emergency agencies within the City (Fire, Office of Emergency Services (OES), CERT leaders, and other like agencies) to assess, evaluate and make recommendations as to exactly how the citizenry of Berkeley will be effectively and systematically alerted in the event of emergencies, like toxic emissions, earthquakes or other natural or human-made disasters if and when it befalls the City.

Ayes: Commissioners Barry, Franklin, Gibson, Kong, Kwanele, Lee, McClure Rosales, Speich, Stein, M. Wong.

Noes: None

Abstain: Neuhauser, A. Wong

Absent from vote: Commissioner Lewis-Hatheway, Mecklai, Namkung, Tempelis

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The dangers from possible toxic emissions and other natural or human-made disasters, are too great to be neglected. Clear agreements with other governmental entities such, as the Contra Costa and Alameda County Health Departments, should be established.

The next step is for the City Council to assign the City Manager to convene a task force to evaluate the City's emergency alert system and how to improve the systems that are in place. The City Manager should then report back to Council with the task force's recommendations.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED

None were considered.

CITY MANAGER

See companion report.

CONTACT PERSON

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