TO:       HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM:   CITY MANAGER    DEPARTMENT: POLICE FIRE

DATE:  APRIL 23, 2007     CMR:219:07

SUBJECT:  SUMMARY OF REDWOOD CITY FIRE/COMMUNITY ALERTING SYSTEM (TELEMINDER) FAILURE

This is an informational report. No Council action is required.

BACKGROUND

On Saturday, April 7, 2007, shortly after 8:00 a.m., a large fire broke out in Redwood City. At 11:55 a.m., the Palo Alto Police Department’s 9-1-1 center received its first indication of the fire, receiving numerous 9-1-1 and telephone calls on its business and seven-digit emergency phone lines. For the next 90 minutes, the dispatchers fielded hundreds of phone calls from residents making inquiries and seeking information about the reason for visible smoke in the neighborhoods. The purpose of this report is to provide the City Council with an accurate and detailed account of the incident, chain of events, and the actions taken by the City’s Police and Fire Departments during this incident. It also provides answers to questions raised by the City Council, the media and residents concerning this incident.

DISCUSSION

On Saturday April 7, 2007, at 8:07 a.m., the Redwood City Fire Department responded to a fire at Sims Auto Recycling located at 699 Seaport Boulevard. Due to weather conditions (wind shifts and the inversion layer from cloud cover), pockets of heavy to light smoke were visible from as far away as South San Jose. The four on-duty Palo Alto Public Safety dispatchers took hundreds of phone calls beginning at about 11:55 a.m. from residents asking questions about the fire, the location of the fire and seeking instruction regarding the smoke. See Attachment “A” for a breakdown of the 9-1-1 calls during the time frame. (Note: Attachment A does not reflect the large volume of calls received on seven-digit emergency and other business lines in the dispatch center.)

Palo Alto dispatchers notified the on-duty Fire Battalion Chief (BC) and Acting Police Watch Commander about the calls and viewed details of the fire on news reports via the Internet. Initial
attempts to gather additional details by Palo Alto staff about the fire were unsuccessful due to the overwhelming activity levels in Redwood City’s dispatch center.

Between the hours of 12:45 and 1:00 pm., Palo Alto dispatchers, following standard protocol, notified the Department’s Technical Services Coordinator Communications Manager. Redwood City did not provide any information from the fire’s Incident Commander that there was any danger to residents. The Patrol Captain was also notified who in turn notified the Police Chief. The on-duty Battalion Chief advised the Fire Chief. Both chiefs informed the City Manager. As the volume of calls continued into the 9-1-1 Center, the Captain asked the Communications Manager to make contact directly with the on-duty BC to obtain additional information. It should be noted that the 9-1-1 dispatchers did an exceptional job handling the large volume of calls.

Even though neither the San Mateo nor Santa Clara County Offices of Emergency Services provided any information regarding any potential health hazards, Palo Alto staff decided that in order to provide information to the community on the fire, given the large volume of phone calls, as a precautionary measure the community alerting and notification system (Teleminder) would be activated. The BC asked that instructions be provided to the elderly, small children and individuals with respiratory problems to “Shelter in Place” within their residence or business should they experience any ill-effects from the smoke. The BC was asked to remain in touch with Redwood City to provide any updates for the Teleminder and to advise Technical Services when the instructions should be canceled.

At approximately 1:45 p.m., Technical Services staff recorded the Shelter in Place message and launched the Teleminder system. The initial instruction was to conduct a citywide notification, an incorrect action taken by a staff member, which resulted in an attempt to send the message to the entire City (132,000 phone numbers). This action immediately caused the system to lock-up. Numerous attempts, supported by Information Technology and Office of Emergency Services (OES) staff, proved futile. The Teleminder system has no vendor support, as the product was sold by the vendor to an outside company. Several attempts to reboot the software were unsuccessful, as well as efforts to reduce the size of the notification area. At approximately 4:00 p.m. the Technical Services Coordinator informed the Police and Fire Chiefs that the Teleminder system was not working and that it did not appear that any warning information concerning the fire could be sent out to residents via this system.

At 2:08 p.m., the Redwood City Emergency Operations Center called to advise that Air Quality Environment officials were at the fire and that they would not be issuing a “Shelter in Place” warning to their residents.

As a result, Police personnel use a number of other avenues to notify residents about the fire. Stanford University’s radio station, KZSU, was notified and they were provided with information about the fire and the recommendations to “Shelter in Place.” KZSU staff broadcasted this information every 30 minutes to their listeners. The Editor of the Palo Alto Weekly was advised and was asked to update its web-page and put out three “e-bulletins” advising subscribers of the fire and
recommended actions. The same information and request was made to the San Jose Mercury News who also updated its website. The Mercury also provided the City with a new website that would enable the City to get information immediately to the editors for the Mercury News’ website for faster notifications.

The City’s Emergency Line was updated to include information about the fire and recommended actions. This line was updated several times on Saturday and Sunday morning so that residents had the most up-to-date information on the status of the fire. Information was included on the Police Department’s website. Additionally, an email message was sent to Palo Alto Neighborhoods (PAN) representatives asking them to send the information out on its email lists. Police personnel also personally contacted a PAN leader seeking assistance. An update via email was sent to the City’s Executive Staff and the City Council. In addition, contact was made with Stanford University Hospital Emergency Room staff alerting them to the situation should they receive inquiries. The Stanford Emergency Room had no knowledge of the fire and had no patients complaining of fire related symptoms.

Police personnel contacted San Mateo County Sheriff’s Department requesting additional information on the fire. Contact was also made with one of the Redwood City Fire Department’s captains assigned to the Emergency Operations Center. At approximately 3:00 p.m., Police personnel obtained up-to-date information on the fire’s status, Redwood City Fire Department’s predictions when the fire would be extinguished and the weather/wind conditions. This information was passed along to neighborhood associations.

Palo Alto Rangers closed Baylands Park when a number of visitors at the park complained of irritated eyes from the smoke. No medical response by Fire Department personnel was requested or required.

It is important to note, that no information was ever received from either San Mateo or Santa Clara County OES offices, the Redwood City Fire Department, or the Air Quality Board about any toxicity or health hazards associated with the fire.

Questions from the Council, Community and Media

*Why did the Teleminder fail?*
An attempt was made to activate the system using the entire citywide map, initiating a message to 132,000 telephone lines. This action caused the system to lock up and additional attempts to reboot the system and re-initiate the request proved unsuccessful. The system was tested during the week of April 9 and was functioning normally.

*Are regular tests conducted on the Teleminder?*
Because the system draws on the 9-1-1 database for telephone numbers, there is no mechanism is the current system to run actual tests that dial phone numbers. However, Technical Services staff routinely checks out the system, and at a minimum, checks the systems function (short of dialing
numbers) on a monthly basis when it uploads the revised 9-1-1 database CD from the telephone company.

*Why didn’t Police and Fire personnel go through the neighborhood with loudspeakers making an announcement about the fire?*

The threat that the fire presented did not rise to the level where Police and Fire personnel would be directed to drive through neighborhoods and make announcements with their public address systems. As noted above, there was no indication from the Redwood City Fire Department, the San Mateo County Office of Emergency Services or the San Mateo County Department of Public Health that the Fire had caused any smoke or fumes that were dangerous to the public. The message via the San Mateo County’s alerting system, which first went out at 1:06 p.m., issued just cautionary information about staying indoors. Notifications would have had to have been made to all areas of the City using the PA system method, including the downtown and Stanford Shopping Center. While the fire was occurring in Redwood City, Palo Alto Police, Fire and Communications personnel were engaged in other unrelated emergency and non-emergency calls for service (Attachment B). It would have been extremely difficult for the limited number of police and fire resources to provide coverage to all the neighborhoods and areas in the City making announcements on loudspeakers and it would have taken a considerable amount of time to do so. If this strategy were employed, staff believe it would have resulted in an over-reaction by the public which would have heightened the level of concern, causing additional calls to the already over-taxed 9-1-1 Dispatch Center.

*Why wasn’t the Council notified by telephone about the activation of the Teleminder?*

Since no specific instruction had been given by the Santa Clara County Health Department or Redwood City Emergency Operations Center, staff informed the City Council via email. In the future, either the command staff of the Police/Fire Departments and/or members of the City Manager’s Office will notify Council members via telephone anytime the teleminder system is activated.

**New Alerting System**

During the past several months, Police staff, with active participation from PAN representatives, has been conducting research, surveying neighborhood association members, and developing the bid specifications for a new community alerting and emergency notification system for the City. City staff and community members are in the final stages of the evaluation process of eight bid proposal and will be selecting finalists for interviews and demonstrations in the coming weeks. Staff will present the City Council with a recommendation no later than the end of May for a new system that will provide the tools needed to handle situations like those faced during this incident much more effectively and efficiently.

As with all police and fire incidents, staff continually review and evaluate actions taken by City personnel to determine lessons learned. In this instance, the technical, communications, and
operational issues as well as training opportunities that were identified have either been implemented or are in the process of being discussed with personnel to avoid any similar problems in the future.

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A: 9-1-1 Call Volume Chart  
Attachment B: Police and Fire Activity Levels

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