

# Sirens and the lack of them in Montgomery County brings many questions to mind

Published on: Thursday, June 30, 2011

By Lauren McLendon and Gina Cairney

Editor's note;

We agreed to run the column from the head of the county's emergency management department, but had some questions regarding his statements of fact. Chris Voss was unable to meet with us prior to publication until 10:30 a.m. Wednesday. At that time he took specific questions regarding his letter, but said he was too busy to answer other questions. So, this is an editorial response to Mr. Voss and the questions The Sentinel still has for the county regarding the use of sirens.

We preface this article with a statement we've obtained by several other emergency management officials around the country who have told The Sentinel that the best emergency systems are those systems which use a variety of methods to alert people as quickly as possible in the event of an emergency. Sirens, we have been told repeatedly are merely one tool, but a vital one to use in this process - hence our series, and hence the term "comprehensive" systems.

Mr. Voss would not speak directly about the idea of a comprehensive system. "That is not included in my letter," he said. "And I think I can't divulge specifics until later."

While he does not currently recommend sirens be used by the county, Mr. Voss did say that the "case is never closed," against augmenting the current alert system, and that "if the technology changes vastly," the county would consider using sirens.

I grew up in the 1960s and 70s in the Ohio River Valley blissfully unaware of the destructive tendencies of tornados and their seemingly arbitrary, yet horrifyingly thorough means of destruction.

We had disaster drills once a month in school. "Duck and Cover," they were called where a siren sounded and we all went under our desks and covered our heads with our hands to prevent nuclear fallout from getting us.

We also had tornado drills. A siren would sound and we would all go out into the hall of the sturdy building, away from windows, and do essentially the same thing. Why? I had no idea as the last time a dangerous tornado touched down where I grew up was in 1899.

I never dreamed until April 3rd, 1974 that those drills were of any real use. Then a day the National Weather Service deemed "Super Outbreak" tornados from Texas to Canada caused unbelievable property damage, and killed thousands. The sirens rang that day and we all ran inside. In my hometown less than a dozen people died. Advanced warning, in a county roughly the same geographic size and make-up as Montgomery County, helped save lives.

Since then I've covered a variety of natural disasters, including my fair share of tornados and hurricanes in multiple states during the last three decades. I marveled at a city in Texas in which an emergency spokesman said anything other than sirens was a waste of time. "Who cares if it's on a computer," he told me. "Even radio and television aren't necessary. Just the sirens."

The best systems I've seen aren't all of one thing, or all of another. They're a mix.

In Mr. Voss's letter, he mentions alternatives to sirens, but none of those alternatives is an all-encompassing blanket, any more than the Texas emergency service manager thought that sirens exclusively were. In our case, a good deal of the population, including transients, could be left out of advanced warnings, if our current system is not augmented by sirens.

Mr. Voss said the most common complaint about sirens is that they can't be heard indoors. The most common complaints, according to surveys in cities that have air raid sirens, is that they are not maintained properly. My personal experience aside, citizens who live in Kansas City, St. Louis, Louisville, Indianapolis, Dayton, Cincinnati and Little Rock have said in surveys they can hear the sirens, even while downtown in an office building.

Mr. Voss said 33 percent of people will "sleep through tornado sirens going off" at night. Of course in this county that means 670,000 people wouldn't sleep through them. That's a good chunk of the populace. And if you're going to sleep through a siren

then chances are you might also sleep through anything else. We currently have no way of reaching 670,000 people quickly in this county.

According to Mr. Voss, currently only 210,000 devices have been issued in the county for Alert Montgomery, and Mr. Voss concedes those devices can be programmed a variety of ways, certainly enabling the user to sleep through whatever alert is given.

Mr. Voss mentions a 1980 study impacting Kalamazoo Michigan where only 17 percent of the populace heard the sirens. This study is 30 years old and does not mention the status of maintenance on the equipment, the area encompassed by the sirens, etc. And, again, if I accept the figures as correct, are we therefore saying that even if we only alert 17 percent of the populace, that we shouldn't alert 170,000 people?

Mr. Voss also wrote of a study showing sirens didn't work or rotate or had damaged speakers. This speaks to a lack of maintenance, and in fact proves the point that once purchased, the system needs to be maintained.

Perhaps it would be best to speak of recent events this summer, readily available on the Internet, YouTube, etc. where residents in many areas spoke to the fact that early notification by siren helped save their lives.

Mr. Voss also said tornado fatality rates at night are 2.5 times greater than during the day. The National Weather Service backs up that claim, which The Sentinel maintains proves the point sirens are needed particularly at night to help facilitate a comprehensive warning system. Of the greatest concern is the assessment of tornado risk in Montgomery County. While we at The Sentinel have also pointed out the relatively low risk, it is troubling that this would be used as a reason to not have a comprehensive plan in place that signifies the greatest majority of our citizens in a timely fashion.

Sirens are also useful for other things:

1. We live within 70 miles of at least six aging nuclear reactors. It might be nice to know if something's going on immediately with one of them.
2. We live next door to the nation's capital and as it has been previously noted, we are home to many of the nation's federal decision makers. Perhaps it would be nice to notify us in a timely fashion of impending doom from a terrorist or other man-made catastrophe. I should think Homeland Security's interest in this would be keen.

But, bottom line, do you really want to play Russian Roulette with Mother Nature? You always lose.

NASA spends millions to chart near-earth objects. True it's been 70 million years since the last extinction level event occurred because of a meteor or asteroid, but forewarned is forearmed.

You can't buck the odds of Mother Nature. She always wins.

While Mr. Voss's siren system cost analysis is not incompatible with our own at The Sentinel, some of it appears to be overstated. Easement isn't as big an issue as it appears. Many of the sirens can be installed on existing county owned property and structures. This is done to save costs all across the country. The whole cost analysis also seems to be calculated to scare us away from implementing a vital public safety system and ignoring the fact that grant money can be applied for to defray the costs.

But, again the most disturbing statement made is that the tornado threat is low, but the siren cost is high - especially since there are better, more reliable systems out there.

The actual threat to assassinate our County Executive or any county executive anywhere in the United States is low, yet we burden the cost here because we deem it necessary. Do we not deem it necessary to protect every other resident in this county - especially when the cost to protect them is lower per person than the cost to protect one county official?

Also, if there are more reliable and better systems out there, where are they? The most reliable system is a comprehensive plan.

Any method of notifying more than a million people will not be all encompassing. It can't be, but there has to be a plan that alerts as many people as possible as quickly as possible. It also has to notify transients, long-term visitors and others who do not have access to weather alert radios, or Alert Montgomery.

No method will notify 100 percent of these people. Several will come close and that's were a siren system comes into play.

Sirens are used across this country in many cities and counties of similar size and population as Montgomery County for one very good reason – they work in conjunction with other systems to alert the greatest number of people in the shortest length of time.

The easiest example is of the emergency alert system, or the old emergency broadcast system. When a tornado warning is issued, that triggers the sirens, and also triggers interruption of broadcast television – and should also trigger broadcast of all networks on your satellite and/or cable system. The emergency alert system then tells you of the impending peril.

This is the same alert given on the weather radio, without having to purchase the radio.

The alert system can be used for a variety of other disasters. All you need is public service announcements to remind everyone. In an area that faces a variety of widespread threats to the general population, we would argue this is a vital community service that should be provided by the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

It should not be our responsibility. It is yours.

Finally the problem with all of the suggestions Mr. Voss gives to notify the public, unfairly places the responsibility for notification on the homeowner or the private citizen. I find this philosophy counterproductive to the very reason why we have a county government in the first place.

Government should provide vital public service.

But you ask that I purchase a radio. You ask that I sign up for Alert Montgomery and you ask that I monitor all weather alerts.

What are you doing for me, since I pay your salary? How about something simple, low-tech and very effective – sound a siren. Let me know when I have to pay attention to you. I don't live to serve the government, the government exists to serve me.

Once we agree on those terms, The Sentinel believes things will run much better.