

Memorandum 11-106 Opt-Out of Automated System Wide Tsunami Warning Activation Program

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MEMORANDUM 11-106

TO: Mayor Hornaday and Homer City Council
FROM: Chief Bob Painter, Chief Mark Robl, Port and Harbor Director Bryan Hawkins, CM Walt Wrede
DATE: July 25, 2011
SUBJECT: Automated System Wide Activation / Tsunami Warning Siren "Opt-Out"

The City of Homer currently participates in an automated system wide tsunami warning system program. In simple terms, what this means is that when an earthquake occurs anywhere in the world, it is monitored and wave arrival times are calculated by the National Weather Service in the lower 48. If it looks like Alaska will be affected, the National Weather Service sends an automated signal to the State Tsunami Warning center in Palmer which then activates sirens simultaneously around the state throughout the entire system. The State does not currently have the ability to "regionalize" or "time" the signals based upon the relative danger and immediacy of the threat. Therefore, the State cannot activate the siren system only in areas that face a threat. The alarm goes off in all coastal areas of the state.

As we saw with the last two "false alarms", sounding the tsunami warning sirens when there is no threat to the community can have serious consequences that go beyond mere inconvenience. The impacts can become exponentially worse if this happens in the middle of the busy summer season. The most recent event caused a near stampede on the Spit as RVs, tent campers and people with boats on trailers rushed to get to higher ground. Many boat owners rushed in the opposite direction toward the harbor to secure their boats, causing further confusion. Dispatch was inundated with calls and the 911 system was tied up preventing callers with real emergencies from getting through. Police officers and harbor officers fanned out to let people know that Homer was in no danger. In short, false alarms can be a threat to public health and safety. Too many of them will eventually cause the public to become cynical and ignore the warnings completely.

Since the last event, the City has been participating in meetings sponsored by the Borough Office of Emergency Management to discuss ways to make the system function better for local communities. A number of improvements have been discussed and Director Mohrman will likely talk about them at the meeting on Monday night. The discussions include different tones for warnings and all clear messages, shorter and more concise voice messages, and staggering voice messages by delivering them one siren at a time to eliminate echoes and other interference. One of the things that has been discussed in detail is the possibility of "opting out" of the automated system wide program and going back to a locally activated system. Many communities have already done this or have not participated since program inception. This includes Kodiak, Valdez, and many of the communities in Southeast. The Kodiak harbormaster reports that the sirens were not activated in Kodiak during the last event. Seward has indicated that it is ready to "opt-out". We recommend that Homer do the same. We have consulted with the Administration in Seldovia, whom Homer dispatches for, and they are in agreement. I expect Tim Dillion, the City Manager to be in attendance at this meeting.

Here is how we envision the new protocol working. The Homer dispatch office already receives multiple notices of earthquakes and possible tsunamis from federal, state, and borough officials in the form of faxes, e-mails, NAWAS Radio transmissions, and phone tree calls. This would be the dispatcher's signal to go to the appropriate websites and other sources of information to determine the nature of the threat to Homer. If appropriate, the dispatcher would contact Chiefs Robl and Painter who would review the situation, the recommended response, and authorize action. The Port and Harbor Director would be notified and in the loop. If no threat existed or more information was needed before a decision could be made, the siren would not be activated. If a threat did exist the siren would be activated. If appropriate, the City Manager would be immediately notified and he would assemble the Emergency Operations staff and prepare to mobilize City resources. The City Emergency Operations Plan would be followed at this point.

The advantage to this approach is that we could avoid further false alarms. The siren would go off only if there was a real threat to Homer and we wanted people to head to high ground. We would keep the siren tones consistent so that everyone knew that when it went off, it was time to get out. We would keep voice messages short and simple

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and will continue working with the Borough to improve the sound. The City already has the ability to activate the sirens and the prerecorded messages locally. Dispatch can also speak over the sirens through a microphone if conditions warrant. Homer dispatchers are already trained on how to activate the system. Before this new system came into use the City had the responsibility for activation jointly with the Borough for over twenty years. We would be simply going back to the way it was.

The warning system is presently activated via the internet and we would propose setting it up so that it can be activated by radio frequency (RF) as well to provide redundancy in the event the internet goes down. The Dispatch Center in Soldotna will also provide back-up. Increased training for dispatch officers and a small investment in radios may be involved. It is likely that the Borough would pay for this. The City would be assuming an additional and very important responsibility but Chief Robl believes we are prepared to do so.

In short, we believe this approach will improve public safety and make the tsunami warning system function better in Homer. It is important to keep in mind that the tsunami warning system will continue to be owned and operated by the Borough. The only thing that would change is that the sirens would be activated locally rather than as part of a system wide automated alert.

RECOMMENDATION: Approve Resolution 11-079

Related Resolutions **Memorandum - Related Resolutions:** [Resolution 11-079\(A\) Authorizing the City of Homer to "Opt-Out" of the Automated, System Wide Tsunami Warning Activation Program](#)

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