

Village may pull the plug on warning sirens

Written by Mark Jaeger

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Residents would have to rely on radios, e-mail to receive weather alerts

Facing costly upgrades, Village of Saukville officials are exploring the idea of disconnecting their four emergency warning sirens.

Emergency Management Director Jack Morrison told the Finance Committee last week that the federal government has ordered all municipalities to update their weather warning systems by 2013.

Morrison said converting the village's five warning sirens to the mandated narrow-band system could cost \$3,000, if the existing equipment can be modified.

If the control boards have to be replaced, he said, the cost could be as much as \$1,900 per siren.

In addition, Morrison noted that the village has spent more than \$3,300 over the past four years providing electrical service and repairing the sirens. The equipment dates to 1998.

Facing the certainty of additional expense, it may be a good time for officials to decide whether they want to continue running the warning systems, he said.

The sirens were activated once last summer as severe weather threatened the area.

After reviewing the issue with the Public Safety Committee, Morrison said it is time the village gets ready to pull the plug on the warning system.

He suggested the village stop making payments for the sirens starting January of 2012 and use the intervening time to inform residents about available options.

"The sirens started as part of the Civil Defense system and are relics from the Cold War days," Morrison said. "They are only intended to provide a warning to people outside that severe weather is approaching. They were never intended to be heard by people with their windows closed and their air conditioners running or inside their cars."

He said the village should conduct a robust informational campaign, stressing the read availability of inexpensive weather radios, e-mail advisories and on-line alerts offered by local television stations.

"The decision to cease the siren warning system is a difficult one that may create an uproar or it just might generate a short-lived buzz," Morrison said.

"But in this era of tight budgets, which does not appear to have a closure in the foreseeable future, it might be the way to go."

As an alternative, Morrison said the village could discontinue the use of some sirens, such as

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the ones mounted on towers in the industrial park and on the grounds of the Department of Public Works.

The siren system is not required by the state or the federal government and has gotten mixed reviews from residents.

“When the North Mill Street siren was out of service, the only comment I got from residents was ‘Thank God it is off,’” Morrison said.

By giving residents plenty of notice about the discontinuation of the siren systems, he said civic groups could get involved by selling inexpensive weather radios.

Morrison said the village could also make money by selling the existing sirens in an on-line auction.

Public informational meetings should be held to explain the available options, he said.

“We would not just pull the plug and leave everyone to themselves,” Morrison promised.

Trustee Mike Krocka, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said getting public input is crucial.

“We felt it would be good to start talking about this now. If there is a big outcry, we would still have plenty of time to fix them,” Krocka said.

Trustee Jen Schoenfeldt urged caution in the siren decision.

“I hate to spend money, but you are expecting taxpayers to go out and buy weather radios or be tech-savvy enough to subscribe to an e-mail service,” Schoenfeldt said.

“I think that is a disservice to some of our residents. I am opposed to anything that leaves these people out.”

The Finance Committee agreed to accept the Public Safety Committee recommendation that the village explore the possibility of dropping the sirens by 2012.

Trustee Bob Hamann voted against the motion.