

Input sought on fate of warning sirens

Written by Mark Jaeger

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Village officials to ask residents if they want additional tax dollars spent upgrading outdated system

Village of Saukville officials are always looking for ways to save money, but they are not willing to pull the plug on their tornado warning sirens without the backing of the community.

The Village Board will host an informational hearing at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 15, to gauge public reaction to the idea of discontinuing use of the warning sirens.

The idea was proposed by Emergency Management Director Jack Morrison after learning it will cost thousands of dollars to upgrade the village's five sirens to meet new federal standards.

Replacing the control boards on the sirens is expected to cost about \$2,500, although Morrison said additional repairs might be needed once the sirens are removed and inspected.

In addition, he said, the sirens cost the village as much as \$700 a year for electricity.

Should the village ever need to install a new siren, Morrison said, it would cost between \$20,000 and \$50,000.

"In this budget environment, how do we pay for that? We honestly don't know," he said.

As an alternative, Morrison said the village could conduct a public information campaign noting the many alternatives available to learn about approaching storms.

"Virtually every TV station offers a warning service that sends out e-mails or text messages to cell phones when there is severe weather in the area. And anyone can buy a dedicated weather radio for about \$40," he said.

Morrison said the problem with sirens, besides their expense, is that they are no longer practical. They were originally intended to warn people who were working or playing outside when a storm approached.

"They are not designed to be heard when you have your house closed up and the air conditioning on," Morrison said.

Another problem, he said, is that they are "non-specific." There is no way to tell whether a sounding siren means a tornado is bearing down on the community or if thunderstorms are passing through the county.

"The National Weather Service has actually gotten pretty good at pinpointing where storms are going. I remember the last time the sirens were used in the county, the weather bureau said the storms would be isolated south of Highway 60," Morrison said.

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“Village Hall and the fire chief then got all kinds of calls from people asking why we weren’t sounding our sirens.”

The warning sirens also fail to trigger the desired response from most people.

“When the sirens do go off, most people seem to go out to their porch to watch for the storm. They don’t head to their basements, which is what they are supposed to do,” Morrison said.

As strongly as he feels that the sirens have outlived their usefulness, Morrison said the decision is rightly in the hands of the residents.

“No decision has been made at this time. If people want to tell us this is something they want the village to spend money on, they have a right to be heard,” Morrison said.

“You hear comments about keeping taxes down all the time. This is one of the few things we saw where we could reduce costs.”

The village sirens are located in the Saukville Business Park, Quade Park, North Mill Street, the grounds of the Public Works Department yard and behind Walmart.