



Legislation Text

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To: Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Department of Emergency Management; Sheriff's Office

Staff Name and Phone Number: Chris Godley / 565-1152; James Naugle / 565-6010

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

Comprehensive Overview and Discussion of County's Public Notification, Alert and Warning Systems and Approval of an Agreement with Everbridge (Nixle) for Public Notification Services

Recommended Action:

- A) Receive staff report on development of the County's Emergency Community Alert & Warning Program.
- B) Review and approve the Alert & Warning Annex to the County's Emergency Operations Plan (EOP).
- C) Authorize the Sheriff to sign an Agreement with Everbridge (Nixle) for Public Notification Services from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2026, with options to extend for two additional one-year periods, at an annual cost not to exceed \$175,000.
- D) Direct inclusion of \$335,500 in the FY 21-22 Supplemental Budget Adjustments necessary to support the proposed updated emergency response services.

Executive Summary:

This item includes an update on the County's Community Alert and Warning program and brings forward the Sonoma County Operational Area Alert and Warning Annex for approval by the Board of Supervisors. Staff is also including adjustment to the Nixle public notification services agreement and direct that ongoing funding be included in FY 21/22 to support updated emergency services.

Upon approval, this Annex establishes policies and protocols and provides staff with consistent direction and guidance for how and when to activate alert & warning systems. This is a supporting annex to the Sonoma County Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan (EOP approved by the Board on 12/09/14 and subsequent De-Energization and Pandemic Annexes approved on 7/15/19 and 03/10/20 respectively. The proposed Alert & Warning Annex was developed consistent with best practices, as well as reviewed and endorsed by the Operational Area Emergency Coordinators Forum - Alert & Warning Working Group, Access and Functional Needs Steering Committee, Sheriff's Office, Sonoma County Office of Equity, and the City of Santa Rosa. The Annex details the four key objectives of the Sonoma County Op Area Alert & Warning program:

- 1. Proactively warn the public of threats by providing timely, targeted, accurate, and actionable information.
- 2. Use multiple, redundant, and overlapping alerting systems to ensure the best possible dissemination of alerts and warnings.

3. Incorporate social equity measures and ensure the ability to reach individuals with access and functional needs by identifying potential barriers and implementing mitigation strategies as required.
4. Coordinate and assist with the delivery of alerts and warnings across jurisdictional boundaries to assure continuity of messaging.

Discussion:

Alert and Warning Program

The October 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires event profoundly impacted Sonoma County communities and focused attention on the mission and capabilities of the County's community emergency alert and warning program.

In 2018, the Board of Supervisors directed staff to assess the County's alert & warning program and its broader emergency management capabilities. The initial internal and external analyses conducted by Christopher Godley on behalf of Tetra Tech, Inc., as well as input provided directly by fire survivors and stakeholder organizations including the Neighborhood Block Captains and California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, identified key strengths and critical areas for improvement, which were reviewed in the Emergency Management Warning Program Assessment at the June 11, 2018 Board meeting. In 2019, the Board established the new Department of Emergency Management (DEM) that included the Community Alert and Warning Program section.

In the past two years, DEM collaborated with local, state, and federal stakeholders to establish a comprehensive community alert and warning program. DEM has developed new policies, procedures, and training as well as employing almost every available warning system technology. These are incorporated as key elements of the proposed Annex.

Some of the Community Alert & Warning program's recent accomplishments include:

1. Expanded number of trained staff that can originate alerts including a 24/7 Staff Duty Officer program;
2. Developed and documented effective alert originator procedures, tools, and training;
3. Established standardized warning message templates supporting simultaneous English/Spanish messaging;
4. Used a new state law to incorporate utility records into the SoCoAlert system and increased system contacts (phone, text, and email) from approximately 105,000 to 367,000;
5. Automated posting of alert messages onto the County's new SoCoEmergency.org website;
6. Conducted five innovative warning system exercises and testing events;
7. Established Operational Area Alert and Warning Advisory Committee, which includes representatives from cities, special districts, County departments, public safety agencies with Access and Functional Needs (AFN) representation led by our Emergency Operations Center AFN representative;
8. Researched and piloted new, advanced warning technologies including NOAA Weather Radio;
9. Sheriff's Office installed Hi-Lo evacuation warning sirens in its entire fleet;
10. Recognized as the first agency in the County to test the new National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration (NOAA) Emergency Messages system;

11. Worked with state and federal agencies to evaluate and improve the technical capabilities and resilience of warning systems including Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA);
12. Explored the potential for development of a network of stationary, outdoor, audible warning sirens. Assessed best practices, siren technologies, systems limitations, deployment strategies, initial/ongoing program costs and also participated in field tests. Sought federal grant funding but were denied. Continuing to assess the potential for use in very specific hazard areas (ex. tsunami inundation zones). The effectiveness of outdoor sirens may be compromised by terrain, vegetation, urban development, and ability to be heard inside buildings;
13. Provided key data and testimony in support of the recent California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) Decision to require wireless carriers to provide 72-hour on-site backup power in high fire threat areas.

However, the most significant measure of the program's capabilities has been via its use in real-world emergencies in 2019 and 2020. The program's warning systems have been used more than 140 times to successfully address life safety threats in wildfire, flood, pandemic, and public safety power shutoff incidents. For example, the County activated the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system 59 times in 2020 - the most extensive use by any single local or state government in the Country.

While the County has been able to maximize the effectiveness of currently available warning technologies, significant work remains to mature the program in order to ensure that County residents and visitors are served by a comprehensive, integrated, and cohesive program. Key objectives going forward include:

1. Continue to streamline the experience of residents by simplifying the current range of overlapping and often confusing warning systems;
2. Expand community engagement and conversations, including training community leaders and facilitating regular feedback and input;
3. In coordination with the Office of Equity, promote equity by focusing on underserved communities such as individuals with Access and Functional Needs (AFN), homeless, farmworkers, and immigrants;
4. Continue to expand the number of agencies that can originate alerts;
5. Improve the ability to rapidly gather and share data on developing emergencies in order to provide more effective information for warning messages;
6. Install additional grant-funded fire monitoring cameras and evaluate the potential for automated artificial intelligence analysis systems to enhance wildfire detection;
7. Distribute auxiliary warning devices to deaf and hard of hearing residents funded by a one-time federal Hazard Mitigation grant in the amount of \$33,000;
8. Expand the range of the NOAA Weather Radio system into more remote areas of the County;
9. Research and integrate new potential warning technologies such as streaming video services and satellite data;
10. Advocate for and support development of standards for the increased resilience and performance of commercial wireless broadband data systems;
11. Explore the long-term potential for a unified and sustainable Operational Area Alert and Warning program;
12. Address the needs of residents in hard-to-reach areas through adoption of new technologies,

supporting efforts to expand broadband access, and empowering local community networking.

In creating the Department of Emergency Management, your Board directed staff to address all elements of a comprehensive emergency management program. Other programs within the department (emergency coordination, community preparedness, and post-incident assessments) are integral and fundamental to the success of the Alert & Warning program. In order to maintain current alert and warning capabilities, the department needs to maintain core funding in not just alert & warning but also across all program areas. In order to do so, the department is seeking \$90,000 for services and supplies and \$100,000 for contracts/post-incident assessments for the FY21-22 budget. As the department completes its second full year of existence, the operational tempo bears out that these amounts accurately reflect the level of fiscal activity in prior years and are needed to maintain services. The department will continue its successful efforts to procure significant state/federal grants to support all programs including alert and warning.

Alert & Warning Annex

This Annex establishes general and specific policies, procedures, and protocols for the use of alert and warning systems in the Sonoma County Operational Area (Op Area) during actual or potential emergencies that pose a significant threat to life or property. This plan serves as a functional annex to the Sonoma County/Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). While individual jurisdictions can develop their own Alert and Warning plans, any alert that is initiated via County systems, by agreement or by request, will conform to this Annex. The Annex incorporates both best practices as well as lessons learned from recent disasters and exercises.

By approving this Annex, the Board is establishing clear and consistent policies and protocols to staff regarding how and when the various alert & warning systems will be used. Key elements include:

1. Priority of order in which warning systems will be employed (WEA, SoCoAlert, NOAA Radio, EAS, Hi-Lo sirens as well as Nixle and social media) (p. 10)
2. Policies and procedures for alert activation, all-clear messaging, and corrections in case of erroneous alerts (pp. 9, 23, 25)
3. Alert and warning functions associated with the preparedness, response and recovery phases (p. 8)
4. Descriptions about the limitations for each warning system (p. 4)
5. Tactics and best practices for how to employ various warning systems (p. 12)
6. Stakeholder agency roles and responsibilities (p. 14)
7. Training and testing standards (p. 28)
8. The issuing of warning messages simultaneously in English and Spanish (pp. 12, 21, 24, 27)

This Annex does not address the long-term potential for developing a unified Operational Area Alert and Warning Program and associated considerations regarding multi-jurisdictional governance, cost sharing, liability, or technology integration.

Sherriff's Office Nixle Community Notification System

Started in 2007 as a community public information system for law enforcement agencies, Nixle primarily provides text and/or email notifications of agency activities, safety information, and community events. Across the County, some 15 law enforcement, fire, and local government agencies employ Nixle at their discretion and as their policies or resources permit. It can be challenging for residents if they are not notified

of incidents that are of interest to them or if they are notified too often. In 2019, DEM coordinated development of Nixle Guidelines to align agencies as much as possible, but they are not prescriptive.

While primarily a public information tool, Nixle can be used to reinforce emergency warnings that is the County's current practice. During all recent major emergencies, DEM supports the initial public warning effort and has worked closely with the Sheriff's Office to integrate Nixle messaging - this cooperative approach is incorporated into the proposed Alert and Warning Annex, and is a practice that DEM and the Sheriff's Office look forward to continuing. In addition, staff are assessing the need and potential for developing a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to support this approach.

The Sheriff's Office currently has more than 350,000 Nixle subscribers and sends an estimated 16 million text messages each year. Of those, roughly 60 percent relate to the larger County mission and the remaining 40 percent related to Sheriff's Office-specific business. County-related business includes messages related to natural disasters, curfews, pandemics, and evacuations. Sheriff's Office-specific business includes messages related to public safety incidents, traffic incidents, active suspect searches, police activity, arrests, and missing persons. In addition to texts, Nixle is also used to send approximately 10 million email messages each year. While text messages come at a cost to the County, email messages are free to send.

Since 2017, the Sheriff's Office has contracted with Everbridge for use of their public notification system, Nixle. Between 2017 and 2020, the Sheriff's Office paid \$29,500 per year for unlimited SMS (text) messaging. However, the wireless broadband carriers have recently instituted a significant surcharge for mass texting resulting in dramatically higher costs for SMS systems such as Nixle.

In September of 2020, the Sheriff's Office issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to procure a contract from a qualified vendor to provide ongoing public notification services. The scope of the RFP included technical capabilities such as ability to accommodate large numbers of users, easy opt-in and opt-out capabilities, ability to target messaging based on geography, rapid delivery of messages, and Spanish-language capabilities.

Proposals were received from five vendors and evaluated by a committee made up of Sheriff's and DEM personnel according to the scoring criteria listed in the RFP, including technical capabilities such as easy opt-in/opt-out functions, geo-targeted messaging, rapid message delivery, Spanish-language capabilities as well as the vendors' experience with public safety and expertise providing similar services to comparable entities. The vendor Everbridge received the highest score, primarily due to high marks for experience and expertise and a proven track record of sending large quantities of text and email messages to multiple subscriber bases as well as cost. County Purchasing has approved the recommendation of Everbridge for these services.

Prior to December 2020, the annual contract cost of \$29,500 covered unlimited SMS messaging. Under Everbridge's new cost model, an initial contract cost of \$29,500 will provide capacity for up to 1.6 million short message service (SMS) messages. Additional messages can be purchased in increments of \$1,000, with a per message rate of 1/10th of one cent. Based on the average messages sent in prior fiscal years, the total contract not to exceed cost is estimated to be approximately \$175,000. If the County experiences a fiscal year without any major disaster events, actual costs should be much lower. If this Agreement is approved by the Board, the additional \$145,500 will be included in the Sheriff's Office FY 21-22 Budget during the supplemental budget adjustment process. The Sheriff's Office will require additional County Discretionary funding to finance the \$145,500 annual cost increase.

The Sheriff's Office, in coordination with the Purchasing Agent, currently has a one-year temporary agreement to bridge the period between the prior contract expiration and the current action. Upon receiving authorization from the Board, the Sheriff's Office will notify Everbridge of intent to terminate the current Agreement on June 30, 2021 in order to execute the new, long-term agreement effective July 1, 2021. In order to prevent the citizens of Sonoma County from having to sign up for new services every three years, the Sheriff is seeking a five-year agreement, with the option to extend for two additional one-year periods.

Alignment with Key County Initiatives

Recovery and Resiliency Framework

The Alert & Warning Annex supports Strategy Area 1 (Community Preparedness and Infrastructure), Goal 1 (Establish a first-class, comprehensive warning program with innovative technology and state-of-the-art situational awareness) and Goal 2 (Meet future challenges by redesigning the County Emergency Management Program, providing additional resources, enhancing external funding capabilities, and recommitting to the County's public safety missions).

2021-2026 Strategic Plan

The Alert & Warning Annex and the Sheriff's Office Nixle system support the Resilient Infrastructure Pillar, Goal 2 (Invest in capital systems to ensure continuity of operations and disaster response) and Objective 1 (Strengthen critical communications infrastructure, interoperability, and information technology tools relied upon during disasters).

Next steps

Staff will immediately implement the policies and procedures in the Annex and address the four County warning program objectives including consistency of messaging across jurisdictional boundaries.

As alert and warning is closely tied to the function of emergency evacuations, staff will bring the new Evacuation Annex and Community Evacuation Zones map to the Board in July 2021 for review and discussion.

Prior Board Actions:

December 9, 2014: Resolution adopting the Revised 2014 Sonoma County Operational Area Emergency Plan.

June 11, 2018: Reviewed and accepted the Sonoma County Community Alert and Warning Assessment and directed staff to implement selected recommended action items. Approved funding to support implementation of selected recommended action items.

January 29, 2018: Staff presentation to the Board of Supervisors on Alert & Warning program recommendations prepared by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (FES).

August 28, 2018: Formalized job classification and allocation of one Community Alert and Warning Program Manager.

March 19, 2019: Formally established the Department of Emergency Management and added allocation for one Community Alert and Warning Program Coordinator.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 20-21 Adopted	FY21-22 Projected	FY 22-23 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$219,500	\$29,500	\$29,500

Additional Appropriation Requested		\$335,500	\$335,500
Total Expenditures	\$219,500	\$365,000	\$365,000
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF	\$219,500	\$29,500	\$365,000
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies		\$335,500	
Total Sources	\$219,500	\$365,000	\$365,000

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The Sheriff's adopted FY20-21 budget includes \$29,500 for the current Nixle contract and DEM's FY20-21 adopted budget includes \$190,000 for services, supplies and post-incident assessments. Due to the cost changes described above for the Nixle contract, the Sheriff's Nixle contract costs will increase by \$145,500 in FY21-22. DEM is seeking \$190,000 in FY21-22 to maintain support for alert and warning as well as other program areas and post-incident assessments. Staff is seeking Board direction to include these sums as a part of the Supplemental Budget Adjustments in the FY21-22 budget. Adjustments will be funded through use of FY 21-22 General Fund Contingencies and will be built into General Fund net cost in the FY 22-23 departmental budgets.

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

None.

Attachments:

1. Sonoma County Operational Area Alert and Warning Annex
2. Everbridge (Nixle) Master Services Agreement
3. PowerPoint

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

None.