

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION MINUTES

October 5, 2010

The City Council of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met in a Study Session at 5:35 p.m. in the Municipal Building Conference Room on the 5th day of October, 2010, and notice and agenda of the meeting were posted at the Municipal Building at 201 West Gray, and the Norman Public Library at 225 North Webster 48 hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

PRESENT: Councilmembers Atkins, Butler Cubberley, Griffith, Kovach, Quinn, Mayor Rosenthal

ABSENT: Councilmembers Dillingham and Ezzell

DISCUSSION REGARDING A REGIONAL OUTDOOR WARNING SYSTEM POLICY.

Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager, said the purpose of this discussion is to bring forth a recommendation from the Central Oklahoma Emergency Managers Association (COEMA), for a regional Outdoor Warning System (OWS) Policy. He said the COEMA discussed a regional OWS Policy and formed a task force to create a proposed policy following significant weather events in early May 2010, including the damaging hailstorm that hit Oklahoma City. He said the National Weather Service (NWS) also provided a member to serve on the task force and are confident they can provide useful and accurate information to assist local jurisdictions in warning decisions. Mr. Lewis said each city currently has their own policy and for a number of years COEMA has hoped for an area-wide policy for the metro area.

Fire Chief James Fullingim said Staff presented an amendment to the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) last spring and Council adopted Resolution R-0910-94, February 23, 2010, amending the Emergency Operations Procedure, alerting citizens to the approach of the spring storm season. He said the resolution also acknowledged the City would begin utilizing the same technology the NWS currently uses, i.e., the polygon warning system. He said doing so allows the City to activate the outdoor warning sirens when the NWS issues a polygon that affects a portion of the City of Norman. Chief Fullingim said the COEMA is represented by a six county region to include Oklahoma, Cleveland, Pottawatomie, Logan, Lincoln, and McClain counties and members from Norman, Canadian County, Del City, Edmond, Midwest City, Moore, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, and Yukon also participated in discussions.

Chief Fullingim presented a draft Regional Activation Policy (RAP) to Council which addressed testing, warnings, and expected community response. He said the draft also included language to provide warning guidelines of significant weather and events other than tornadoes and said COEMA's goal is to see a policy widely adopted by various jurisdictions in the metro area to ensure consistency in warnings throughout the larger community. Chief Fullingim said the emergency managers throughout the area felt this to be an effective guideline to provide safety of citizens that are outdoors in the event of severe weather.

Chief Fullingim said the City's current activation policy is designed to warn citizens of approaching tornadoes, uses information from multiple sources including the NWS, and sirens are activated if tornadic activity threatens any portion of Norman. He said the new regional policy elements include period testing, expected community reaction to warning(s), and activation guidelines.

The periodic testing is currently performed at noon on Fridays and the regional policy proposed all jurisdictions audible test their OWS for three (3) minutes at least once per month on Saturday at noon. Chief Fullingim said some communities currently test OWS on Saturday and have volunteer groups who participate in the testing, going to the OWS site(s), and verifying whether or not they heard the warning. He said COEMA discussed testing on Wednesdays but felt it might cause concern and confusion since the NWS

and the Federal Government (FG) currently test all their warning systems on Wednesdays, i.e., citizens may wonder why Norman tested OWS and NWS and FG did not or visa versa. Chief Fullingim said the Saturday test of the OWS may be suspended for the following reasons: when the NWS has issued a severe thunderstorm/tornado watch or warning for the Central Oklahoma Region; imminent threat of severe weather; freezing temperatures below 32 degrees Fahrenheit; and requests to not sound the system because of large outdoor special events, sporting events, and/or ceremonies. He said jurisdictions may conduct a silent test of their OWS at their own discretion and with the new technology Staff plans to perform a silent test daily.

Chief Fullingim said one concern debated at length has been the expected citizen reaction when the OWS is activated. He said some communities, including Norman, expect citizens to “take shelter and seek further information,” which most generally implies the citizen seek shelter underground. Chief Fullingim said since Norman is 196 square miles, typically a citizen will check to see if the warning applies to them via weather information from the media. He said one benefit of the OWS Policy is the warning(s) will be to a larger group of people and COEMA anticipates getting the media and/or metro meteorologists involved with the proposal since citizens usually listen to the television and/or radio to hear recommendations.

Chief Fullingim said the Regional Activation Policy is proposed as follows:

- Each local jurisdiction determines when to activate their OWS based on a validated imminent threat, considering the following factors: NWS Tornado Warning; Credible report of tornadic conditions; Location of the hazard or threat; and Timing of the hazard or threat
- A jurisdiction may activate their OWS more than once during an event as new or additional threats are identified or move into or across their jurisdiction
- A jurisdiction may activate when a Severe Thunderstorm Warning with destructive winds greater than 75 miles per hour (mph) or reported hail size greater than two (2) inches poses a threat to a large outdoor public gathering
- No local jurisdiction will issue an “All Clear” signal

Chief Fullingim said jurisdictions will also have a local option to activate OWS for other hazardous conditions or threats that pose an immediate threat to life safety to include: dam breaches; wildland fires; hazardous material incidents; and enemy attack. He said especially in eastern Oklahoma this option could be advantageous to provide a tone and voice message about approaching wildfire(s) and the need to evacuate the area.

Chief Fullingim said Norman currently implements several practices of the proposal *except* activating an OWS to a large outdoor public gathering when a Severe Thunderstorm Warning has destructive winds greater than 75 mph or hail size greater than two inches. He said there was a lot of debate and discussion concerning this particular proposal because some members of the COEMA felt the NWS is not as accurate in giving a fifteen minute warning to the public during large outdoor events.

Chief Fullingim said a lot of concern about providing an OWS in the early morning hours, i.e. 1:00 a.m. etc., was it might cause citizens to go outside to move vehicles and/or patio furniture and expose themselves to immediate danger. He said the purpose of the OWS is to protect lives, not protect vehicles and/or outdoor furniture and sounding an OWS during early morning hours might create more problems since most would not be outside in the first place. He said, however, if the OWS sounded in the early morning hours to alert citizens of a tornado warning, rather than a severe windstorm, it would allow the citizen to take shelter and/or

seek more information. He reiterated being asleep inside a home during a storm with winds greater than 75 mph would be acceptable, but being asleep inside a home would not necessarily be the best place if a tornado were approaching the area.

Chief Fullingim said there was also a lot of concern about how consistent the City can be when providing good warning(s) for high winds and hail. He said a good example was the micro burst that occurred in Norman in July 2010, which produced winds of 80 to 90 mph. He said in situations where wind storms approach the area very quickly; there may simply not be enough time to warn citizens. Chief Fullingim said there will be some public expectation about a warning that the City will not be able to meet each and every time; however, he realizes that is no excuse not to provide the warning when capable. He said the new system will allow voice messages assigned with the warning, therefore when a warning is provided it will give a pre-recorded message stating the reason for the warning. He said the system will communicate what the actual threat is to the citizen(s).

Chief Fullingim requested Council direction and said COEMA will meet October 21, 2010, to discuss input from local governments, address any issue that may exist, and hopefully implement a plan. He said if Council wishes to adopt the proposed RAP, Staff will forward a resolution directing an amendment of the EOP for Council consideration.

Councilmember Kovach asked Staff if the weekly/monthly test would also include voice message testing and Chief Fullingim said the three minute test will end with a message stating, "...this concludes the weekly test of the OWS." Councilmember Griffith asked if Staff would continue with the weekly tests and Chief Fullingim said Staff intended to do a silent test every morning and also test the OWS every Saturday, with the understanding every Saturday might not be available, i.e., inclement weather, events at local parks, downtown festivals, and/or University of Oklahoma home football games. He said the morning silent testing will provide information of any problems so Staff can address them quickly.

Councilmember Kovach said it is important to educate the public and emphasize the OWS does not intend to replace weather radios, etc. He felt citizens need to understand the OWS is primarily for outdoor citizens. Chief Fullingim felt citizens can be educated and reminded that a weather radio is what should warn them while indoors during early morning hours and they should not count on the OSW to do so. Chief Fullingim said it is difficult to get all citizens to understand this concept but the City has partnered with Wal-Mart to put weather radios on sale and provide volunteers to help program them, which has been very successful.

Councilmember Cubberley asked Staff if they anticipated doing a public education campaign on a regional basis rather than locally because most people will go outside when they hear thunderstorms with hail and/or high winds. Chief Fullingim said yes and said COEMA expects a significant amount of media coverage. He said the old system did not warn citizens about the specifics of a storm but the new RAP will give detailed information, although still limited, persuading citizens to stay indoors. Mayor Rosenthal said there are potential Public Service Announcements (PSA) and educational pieces Staff might think about getting to radio and television in order to help clarify some of the concerns. Councilmember Quinn also suggested listing the public tornado shelters available to citizens and Chief Fullingim said there are designated public shelters in the City; however they were not engineered and designed to provide shelter from tornadoes. He said the City primarily encourages citizens to go to the public shelters if they are stranded outdoors, not if they are indoors. He said if citizens are in their own homes they should find a "safe place" in their home because it will probably be just as secure as the public shelters. Councilmember Kovach asked if there is a program to educate children about what they should do in case of severe weather and Chief Fullingim said not currently, but Staff can explore.

Council discussed and directed Staff to proceed forward with the proposed RAP and bring back a resolution in November for Council consideration.

Items submitted for the record

1. Memorandum dated September 30, 2010, from James Fullingim, Fire Chief, to Steve Lewis, City Manager
2. Resolution R-0910-94
3. Proposed Central Oklahoma Emergency Management Association Regional Outdoor Warning System Policy
4. Historical Oklahoma County Severe Thunderstorm Warnings Statistics by Wind Speeds, Hail Size, and Damaging Winds
5. PowerPoint presentation entitled "Regional Outdoor Warning System Policy," presented by James Fullingim, Fire Chief

The meeting adjourned at 6:00 p.m.

ATTEST:

City Clerk

Mayor