



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: July 18, 2006

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT: MOVING BEYOND REVERSE 9-1-1 TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY NOTIFICATION TECHNOLOGY (DISTRICT: ALL)

SUMMARY:

Overview

The County of San Diego's current Reverse 9-1-1 system has the capability of making 264 calls per minute or 15,840 calls per hour. Newer technology, called a mass notification service, can send 12,400 30-second voice messages a minute or 744,000 an hour.

The 2003 firestorms reminded us of how important it is to pass accurate information from emergency managers to residents as quickly as possible. More recently we have all heard the warnings about how quickly outbreaks of Bird Flu or other pandemic flus could spread throughout the nation. Be it evacuation notices, focused measures to increase social distance, a chemical spill, sex offender alerts, or a missing child, getting the word out in minutes rather than hours could mean the difference between someone living or dying.

Recommendation(s)

VICE-CHAIRMAN RON ROBERTS AND SUPERVISOR GREG COX:

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to explore the feasibility of replacing our current Reverse 9-1-1 system with a mass notification service that is capable of delivering thousands instead of hundreds of messages a minute.
2. Direct the CAO to explore funding options for such a system including the possibility of partnering with cities, fire districts, and water districts and using homeland security funding to create an overall better value for all participants.
3. Direct the CAO to report back to the Board of Supervisors in 120 days with recommendations on the implementation and funding of such a system.

SUBJECT:

Fiscal Impact

There are no fiscal impacts associated with today's action.

Business Impact Statement

N/A

Advisory Board Statement

N/A

BACKGROUND:

The evacuations prompted by Firestorm 2003 demonstrated a need for the County to better prepare for the next time we would have to give emergency notification to residents in the event of a major disaster. On December 2, 2003, under the leadership of Supervisor Greg Cox and Sheriff Bill Kolender, the Board of Supervisors directed the CAO to explore the feasibility of purchasing and implementing an emergency notification system in San Diego County that could be integrated with the existing County Alert Service System (CASS).

The CAO returned to the Board of Supervisors on March 16, 2004 with a recommendation to amend the existing CASS contract and to upgrade the system to include residential emergency notification capabilities. With Board of Supervisors' support, a few software modifications, and after a series of community pilot tests, this interim system became operational in November 2004 in the unincorporated areas of the County and the Sheriff's nine contract cities.

Our Current Reverse 9-1-1 System

On March 22, 2005 the CAO returned to the Board of Supervisors with recommendations to solicit bids for a permanent notification system. In accordance with Board action the County entered into a two-year contract with Sigma Communications to provide a Reverse 9-1-1 system to the County of San Diego, which is in use today.

The system, which is housed in the Sheriff's Communications Center, has the capability of making 264 calls per minute or 15,840 calls per hour. The system can be activated by the Sheriff's Communications Center Watch Commander, the Director of the County Office of Emergency Services, or the Sheriff's Management Team. If one of the nine contract cities wishes to activate the system in an emergency they must contact the Sheriff's Communications Center.

Reverse 9-1-1 versus a Mass Notification Service

Our current Reverse 9-1-1 system is called a high velocity phone calling system because it uses a computer auto dialer that is connected to many different ports or phone lines to place calls. The system is capable of making 15,840 calls per hour.

Much like a Reverse 9-1-1 system, a mass notification service would allow the County to record and send emergency notification messages to the community. The key difference is the speed; a mass notification service can send 12,400 30-second voice messages a minute or 744,000 an hour. Sandag estimates that as of 2005 San Diego County contains 1,108,500 households. With our current system it would take three days to send a message out to every household. A mass notification service could do this in an hour and a half.

SUBJECT:

Additionally, mass notification services offer a smarter technology capable of operating despite extreme pressure that large scale disasters place on phone systems. Mass notification system technology utilizes a combination of conventional phone, voice over Internet protocol, and next generation network routing / load balancing technology to get calls through even when the phone lines are jammed by a spike in phone activity after a disaster. Municipalities and school districts using this technology in areas affected by the recent hurricanes benefited from this type of technology. Their officials were able to send messages before storms hit, despite extreme pressures on the local telecommunications infrastructure which included power outages that could potentially impair notifications by Reverse 9-1-1 type auto-dialers.

Another advantage of a mass notification system is that anyone who is authorized to access the system can easily send a message from any telephone or computer because it is decentralized. By allowing first responders direct access to the system, information can be disseminated to the public without having to call into a central location and wait for a systems operator to create and send out a message.

The 2003 firestorms reminded us of how important it is to pass accurate information from emergency managers to residents as quickly as possible. More recently we have all heard the warnings about how quickly outbreaks of Bird Flu or other pandemic flus could spread throughout the nation. Be it evacuation notices, focused measures to increase social distance, a chemical spill, sex offender alerts, or a missing child, getting the word out in minutes rather than hours could mean the difference between someone living or dying.

It is our desire that any new system that may be implemented is used most efficiently as possible and for serious public uses only. Today's recommendations will ensure the County remains at the cutting edge of community notification technology by directing the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to explore the feasibility of replacing our current Reverse 9-1-1 system with a next generation mass notification service that is capable of delivering thousands instead of hundreds of messages a minute. We are also recommending that the Board of Supervisors direct the CAO to explore funding options for such a system including the possibility of partnering with cities, fire districts, and water districts and using homeland security funding to create an overall better value for all participants.

San Diego County residents deserve the technology that gives them the best chance at survival during a regional disaster.

Respectfully submitted,

GREG COX
Supervisor, First District

RON ROBERTS
Vice-Chairman, Fourth District

