TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: CITY MANAGER  DEPARTMENT: POLICE

DATE: AUGUST 7, 2006

CMR:329:06

SUBJECT: POLICE DEPARTMENT'S POLICIES ON COMMUNITY NOTIFICATION

This is an informational report and no Council action is required.

DISCUSSIONS

Recently, the Police Department has been asked about its policies regarding community notifications for various incidents. This report provides a description of the types of incidents and types of notification strategies currently in place, recent internal changes the Department has made to improve communications and some ideas the Department is currently researching.

The Police Department responds to a number of incidents that require a large number of police officers to conduct extensive searches and take various types of enforcement action and/or responses. These incidents can range from searches for armed and dangerous suspects; arrests; mountain lion sightings; outside law enforcement agency requests; disasters; shootings; etc. In some of these circumstances, there is an immediate threat to public safety that is associated with the major police presence; in others, the Department wants only to notify the community. In determining the policies, the Department tries to maintain a balance between the community’s need to know versus taking an action that could cause undue fear, anxiety and possible panic. The bottom line is that when the public’s safety is in immediate jeopardy, notifications need to be made in a timely fashion.

Current Policies - The Department has developed a coordinated, multi-layered plan designed to keep the public informed as to what is occurring in and around their neighborhoods, schools or businesses. Attachment A provides a matrix that describes the type of incident, the levels and audiences of notifications. As an example, in the case of a child abduction, the Police Department would make notifications to schools; issue an immediate press release; send email alerts to neighborhoods; contact residents via the Teleminder system; provide information on the Police Department and City’s Web site; notify City employees, the City Council; and hold a press conference and community meetings.

The City Council approved the purchase of a new neighborhood alerting system as part of the Capital Improvement Budget. The current system may only be activated when there is an imminent threat to life or property per the State of California’s 9-1-1 regulations because the database used
contains unpublished telephone numbers. In addition, the current system has limited capacity and can make only about 600 calls an hour. Newer and more contemporary community alerting technology will allow notifications through a variety of media and provide notifications at a rate of several thousand per hour, with enhanced flexibility for use. Citizens will receive a pre-recorded message, email or text message explaining the nature of the emergency and any specific instructions that they should follow. Staff will be sending out a request for proposal to vendors next month. Prior to that time, staff will hold two community meetings to get input from residents. Staff is working with representatives from Menlo Park and East Palo Alto who are interested in joining this endeavor.

**Newly Adopted Internal Policies** – In June, the Police Chief designated a Sergeant as the Department’s full-time Community Relations Officer for a year’s trial period. This action was taken after staff recognized the importance of having a single point of contact for the media during significant incidents and for community outreach.

The Department will continue with its Public Information Officer (PIO) program because the PIOs have collateral responsibilities such as detective, patrol officer, etc. However, due to limited resources, notifications to the press and the community have not always been done on a timely basis. The Department will consequently be increasing the number of trained PIOs that respond to any significant police actions. In the past, during large-scale incidents or situations where police activity impacts neighborhoods, schools or businesses, the Department would assign one PIO to coordinate press liaison activities with the television, radio and print media as well as issuing press releases. By increasing the number of PIOs, a second and if necessary, a third PIO, will respond to assist. The second PIO will be responsible for notifying community members, schools, businesses, City employees, etc. as appropriate via emails using list-serves, telephone calls, the community alerting system and the Department website.

The City’s Information Technology staff has trained the Department’s PIO on how to make changes to the Department’s website from a remote location using recently purchased wireless technology. This will allow the PIO to update the website, send press releases and list-serve notifications in “real-time” from a command post. The PIOs will also be able to provide citizens with specific safety instructions, suspect descriptions and general updated information. Citizens will be able to log-on and learn more about what is occurring in their neighborhood as it occurs. The PIOs will have access to this list-serve comprised of several hundred neighborhood associations and businesses in the field.

Staff has begun posting information in the Palo Alto Weekly’s Town Square as well.

**Other Ideas Being Researched** – Staff continues to explore new and creative ideas for improving communication with the public during an emergency. As an example, there are organizations that provide community alerts and information on-line in several communities across the country. Staff will be looking into them to see if they may be of some use.
ATTACHMENT

Attachment A: Types of Incidents and Responses

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