

CITY COUNCIL OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE MINUTES

August 7, 2013

The City Council Oversight Committee of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met at 5:30 p.m. in the City Council Conference Room on the 7th day of August, 2013, and notice and agenda of the meeting were posted in the Municipal Building at 201 West Gray 48 hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

PRESENT: Councilmember Holman and Chairman Miller

ABSENT: Councilmembers Jungman and Kovach

STAFF PRESENT: Councilmember Robert Castleberry, Ward Three
Mr. Terry Floyd, Development Coordinator
Mr. James Fullingim, Fire Chief
Mr. David Grizzle, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator
Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager
Ms. Leah Messner, Assistant City Attorney
Ms. Syndi Runyon, Administrative Assistant IV

Item 1, being:

DISCUSSION REGARDING SEVERE WEATHER PREPAREDNESS.

Mr. James Fullingim, Fire Chief, provided a brief history of the City of Norman providing public shelters during severe weather. He said since the 1970's the City has operated public storm shelters at Cleveland Elementary, Little Axe High School, Irving Middle School, and Whittier Middle School. He said the University of Oklahoma (OU) provided public shelter at the Oklahoma Memorial Stadium for many years, but ended accessibility to the general public after the stadium's expansion.

Chief Fullingim said schools do not meet federal requirements regarding survivability and the Norman School Administration has safety concerns regarding the public having access into the schools during the hours classes are being conducted.

Chief Fullingim said Council is updated on the severe weather preparedness policy each year and the last update was in January 2013, with a follow-up in February 2013. He said, at that time, Council made a decision to close all public shelters as of July 1, 2013, and an article was placed in the local newspaper. He said the Fire Department has a community outreach program regarding severe weather and will talk to anyone at any time regarding the sheltering in place philosophy, which is the nationally recognized philosophy. He said once the City has issued a tornado warning, it is too late to make a plan so citizens are encouraged to have a personal plan for sheltering in place whether they are at work, home, school, shopping, etc. He said the Fire Department distributes information during the Medieval Fair and other special events as well as at Sooner Mall, schools, etc. He said each year the Fire Department distributes and installs free smoke detectors to an area in Norman and will distribute information on severe weather preparedness as well. He said the Fire Department will assist citizens in making a personal plan if they desire.

Chief Fullingim said closing the public shelters was an administrative decision and if there is a situation where panic strikes, Council or the City Manager could decide to reopen the shelters. Councilmember Miller asked if there had been many calls regarding the news article and Chief Fullingim said the Fire Department received no comments, but there were a couple of letters to the editor in support of closing the public shelters.

Chief Fullingim highlighted some of the items currently in place that help the City during and after a severe weather event. He said the City of Norman has a debris removal plan and contract in place, which allows for a larger reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and quicker removal of debris. The City also has a Community Volunteer Program consisting of a few professional Ham Radio operators that provide help and information during severe weather events. He said many citizens believe the City should make use of the local National Weather Center (NWC), but they do not understand that the NWC serves a different function and does not make decisions for local jurisdictions; however, the City does utilize their expertise in making decisions. He said since the May 1999 tornado, the City has administered three Safe Room Rebate Programs and another program has been submitted to the State, but is yet to be funded. He said there are currently 500 active applications from citizens for the rebate program.

Chief Fullingim said a new Outdoor Warning System (OWS) was recently installed to provide coverage to the entire city limits. He said the old system installed in the 1950's and 1960's was very unreliable, had continuous maintenance issues, and was inconsistent in its coverage. The Fire Department is able to run multiple silent tests on the new system and an audible test on Saturdays at noon to let citizens know the system is functioning.

Councilmember Castleberry said Norman Public Schools has a notification system they use to notify parents of emergencies, bus delays, etc., and asked if the City has looked at this type of system. Chief Fullingim said it is generally known as the Reverse 911 System and the City has seen many presentations on the system and it can be used for a number of things including tornado warnings, but it is not a cure all. He said if the notifications could be narrowed down to a small area the messages would get out quicker, but one problem is people want to be contacted through multiple phone numbers, which bogs down the notification process. He felt the system would be beneficial as an additional tool to inform citizens about what has occurred and what to expect next after an event. He said with enough lead time, the system would work for tornado warnings, but sometimes there is no lead time with tornadoes. For example, in 2011, there were two tornadoes on the ground before the NWS issued a tornado warning and the City of Norman activated their warning system one minute before the NWS issued their warning. He said this is known as negative lead time. Councilmember Castleberry asked the cost of the system and Chief Fullingim said the initial investment is approximately \$100,000 and there would be an annual expense for maintenance. Chief Fullingim said he is an advocate for the system, but would not like to sell it as a way to alert citizens of a tornado because tornadoes are so unpredictable. Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager, said multiple phone banks around the world would be needed because you could not depend on one local exchange to handle the volume of calls for 50,000 households that have multiple numbers to notify. Councilmember Castleberry asked if Chief Fullingim is more comfortable using only the OWS and Chief Fullingim said he would be comfortable with the OWS and the Reverse 911 System (not for tornado warnings) because people need to have multiple warning systems. He said he encourages people to purchase National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) Weather Radios and would love to find a way to give those away. He said the City has applied for several grants over the years to purchase NOAA radios to give them away, but discount coupons are the best thing the City has been able to offer citizens.

Chief Fullingim said Norman follows the Regional OWS Policy Guidelines developed through a collaborative effort by participants from Norman; Canadian County; Del City; Edmond; Midwest City; Moore; Oklahoma City; Oklahoma County; Yukon; and the NWS. He said the guidelines were developed after unprecedented severe hail storms in 2010, and people felt they should have been warned about hail storms. He said this started the conversation on how to do that, but the NWS said it would be extremely difficult to predict the ferocity of hail storms so participants agreed the OWS should be used to warn people about tornadoes so the warnings are not so overused that people begin to ignore them. He said another discussion topic was an "all clear" warning so people would know when it was safe to go outside and it was decided that no local jurisdiction would have an all clear signal. He said sirens tell people to go inside and gain further information

about the weather and the theory is that if you went inside to gain further information about the weather there would be no need to be told when it was clear because you have gained that information and as long as there is a tornado coming toward your area, you need to stay in shelter and when that threat is gone you can come out of the shelter. He said the concern about an all clear signal was that when there were multiple storms coming through it is important for people to listen to local weather to make sure it is clear enough for them to come out of shelter.

Chief Fullingim said people have the perception that the sirens mean “go dig a hole and climb in it,” but Norman is 196 square miles so there is a good chance that while it may be bright and sunny where you are, Little Axe could have a tornado on the ground. Councilmember Miller asked if the sirens go off all over town when they are activated and Chief Fullingim said the City has the ability to activate sirens in zones and the zones are commonly broken down to the east side of town and the west side of town because it is difficult to narrow the scope more than that. He said a tornado could suddenly begin moving north or south and those citizens would not be warned in time to seek shelter. Councilmember Holman asked if the all clear sound could be a different tone than the warning siren and Chief Fullingim he would not feel comfortable issuing an all clear until he was 100% sure there were no further storms that could affect Norman, which could be up to 24 hours. He said no local jurisdiction issues an all clear under the Regional OWS guidelines.

Chief Fullingim said people seeking shelter at City sponsored public shelters seem to be what to expect during storms, but that is not what the City wants people to do. He said during the May 31, 2013, storm event, the sirens went off and people got into their vehicles to drive to a public shelter causing traffic gridlock and leaving them exposed to the weather. He said people have called or traveled from Del City, Midwest City, and Edmond seeking shelter in Norman because they do not have public shelters in their communities. He said the public shelters are schools and schools are not constructed to withstand the storm any better than most homes. He said if 1,000 to 1,500 people seek shelter at the schools, there is a real problem. He said the Fire Department opens and staffs shelters with a goal to open them one hour prior to an expected tornadic event; however, that is not always possible and there is not always enough lead time. He said many times the storm dissipates and the shelter is not occupied by the public or the storm comes up so suddenly that Staff has to go out in the middle of the storm to open the shelter placing them at risk. He said people need to be concerned about what is above them when they seek shelter. Many times they believe basements are safe, but ceilings fall into basements and most of the people killed by tornadoes are killed by falling or flying debris or being sucked into the tornado. He said if you do not have a substantial roof or ceiling structure above you then you are no safer in that building than you would be at home.

Chief Fullingim said Central Oklahoma Emergency Managers discourage public shelters. He said Shawnee and Newcastle are the only communities researched that offer public shelters and although Norman is under administrative action relative to the opening/closing of public shelters and Staff is seeking a resolution from Council because once closing the public shelters becomes a Council action it is more difficult to change. It provides citizens more clarity on the issue and allows them time to get their emergency plan in place prior to next year’s storm season. He said Shawnee is discussing ways to discontinue their public shelters and Newcastle’s population is so small they believe their shelters are adequate. He said a small town with a population of 1,200 consisting of eight square blocks has a better chance of sponsoring public shelters than a town of 100,000 with 196 square miles.

Chief Fullingim highlighted the posted shelter rules that include no pets allowed; no alcohol or intoxicated person allowed; no smoking on facility property; no firearms or weapons; being respectful to others; no loitering outside shelter; and no leaving the shelter until the storm has dissipated and it is deemed safe. Anyone who does not follow the rules/regulations will be asked to leave the premises. Chief Fullingim said many times the public shelters have been filled to capacity and physical violence has occurred when arguments break out due to high tension when people are enclosed in close proximity to each other. He said

any time there is overcrowding, there is civil unrest and many police officers will come to assist in these instances; however, when the police leave problems arise again. He said people will bring their pets which causes problems. He said Norman Regional Hospital was so overrun with people seeking shelter during the May tornado they feared they would not be able deal with any influx of patients injured during the tornado. He said this is a real problem and the cultural mindset needs to be changed regarding getting into a vehicle and driving to a shelter. He said most of them are leaving a perfectly safe place in comparison to where they are going. He said big buildings look substantial because of all the concrete, but that concrete just holds the roof up, it is not meant to withstand tornadic winds.

Chief Fullingim said residential shelters are the best option for residents. He said the City has offered shelter rebate grants in the past, has currently applied for a shelter rebate grant, and will continue to seek grants in the future. The City has a shelter registration program and that registry has doubled in the last two months from 1,500 to 3,000. He said some people are concerned about disclosing the location of their shelter because it is a public document and they fear people will panic and take over their shelter if they are able to find the locations. Councilmember Castleberry asked if there has been a request for those records and Chief Fullingim said not to date and there has been debate about some portions of the information not being available through the Open Records Act (ORA), but the addresses would be subject to the ORA. Mr. Lewis said most people are afraid the information could be disclosed on the City's website and they do not want to advertise they have a shelter because it is possible that people will try to commandeer a shelter. He said the property owner may be out of town or gone and someone could use your shelter.

Chief Fullingim said mobile homes or the third floor of an apartment complex are not safe places to be, but there are no answers for that except to have a plan that works for you. He said it is all about personal preparedness and each individual needs to make a plan and while the City can assist with guidelines, we cannot make a plan for 100,000 people. He said most homes are considered to be a substantial structure, but if a person is truly concerned they need to think about installing a certified storm shelter. Councilmember Miller asked if apartments or mobile home managers are required to notify residents of a safe place to shelter and Chief Fullingim said there is no specific legislation that requires that.

Chief Fullingim asked Council to consider adopting a resolution officially eliminating the public shelters. He said the City would also work closely with OU and Cleveland County to see how they are handling discouraging the use of their buildings as public shelters. He said OU will continue to allow students into the Student Union because they cannot close the Student Union down and lock students out, but how do they intend to discourage the public from utilizing that as a shelter? Councilmember Castleberry said if Council does not adopt a resolution, can the City Manager direct Staff to open the public shelters and Mr. Lewis said yes, there is nothing in writing that formalizes the Council's administrative instructions to close the public shelters. Mr. Lewis said Midwest City adopted a resolution to close their shelters, but does not know if other cities have done that formally or not. Chief Fullingim said most of the cities never offered public shelters in the first place.

Chief Fullingim said could also consider more stringent construction regulations. He said Joplin, Missouri, began requiring wind resistant construction after their last huge tornado destroyed a large portion of town and wind resistant construction is a common practice in Florida where hurricanes are experienced. He said wind resistant construction will allow a home a better chance of surviving an F2 or F3 tornado, but it is not tornado proof. He asked for Council input as to whether there was a desire to discuss the value of such a requirement or other requirements such as requiring new mobile home parks to have provisions for storm shelters before the project is approved, requiring storm shelters for new apartment complexes over two stories, or requiring new residential construction to include storm shelters, etc.

Chief Fullingim said the City of Moore is reassessing their building standards for the rebuilding process in the aftermath of the May tornado. He said one proposal would require homes to have 60% brick coverage and a garage. He said many houses did not meet that criteria before the tornado and one Moore Councilmember felt it could place an unfair burden on residents whose homes did not meet the requirements prior to the tornado as their insurance checks would not cover the cost of the additional requirements to rebuild. Chief Fullingim said Norman is a different looking community than Moore in that Norman has a lot of historical areas and the older section of Norman is a much larger area. He said there are areas of Norman where the City will not want garages built, but it is worth discussing what standards Norman would like to have in those areas and have regulations in place before disaster strikes so insurance companies will cover those expenses for citizens. Chief Fullingim said the City of Moore assembled a committee consisting of builders and stakeholders to review building construction code changes, but the committee is hesitant to recommend a requirement for storm shelters in new residential areas, mobile home parks, or apartment complexes.

Chairman Miller asked whether Staff researched best practices in other communities that deal with extreme weather conditions such as tornados or hurricanes and Chief Fullingim said not at this time, but communities can affordably guard against hurricanes and F-2 tornadoes through stringent building standards. He said hurricanes are more like an F2 tornado, which is not the same as an F5 tornado and it would not be cost effective to build a community to withstand an F5 tornado. He said storm shelters or safe rooms are the best solution to surviving that type of event. Chairman Miller felt it would be difficult to require residents or schools to install storm shelters and did not know what type of incentives could be offered to encourage this; however, she does have a problem with mobile home parks not providing shelters because it is so dangerous. Mr. Lewis said there has been legislation that targets certain requirements for mobile home parks so there are types of legislation that do happen, but nothing has been adopted to date. Mr. Terry Floyd, Development Coordinator, said he researched areas hit by tornados and hurricanes and very few required storm shelters, but most did make changes to construction building codes.

Chairman Miller said the Oversight Committee should propose a resolution to Council as recommended by the Fire Department and Emergency Management to close the public shelters. She felt the City might be putting citizens in more danger by not closing the public shelters. She said public education would be needed to let people know the public shelters are no longer going to be available and they need a shelter in place plan. She is concerned about what to do if people show up at the public shelters at the next big storm and Chief Fullingim suggested placing police officers at the shelters to stop the public from entering. He felt closing the shelters and getting the word out to the public would force them to make a personal plan. Councilmember Holman suggesting partnering with Norman Public Schools in getting the information to the public that the shelters are no longer available and how to make a personal plan. The Fire Department accepted a grant in June to purchase storm preparedness literature to distribute and Chief Fullingim said that information is included in students' Thursday folders.

Councilmember Holman was concerned about people showing up at the recreation centers and wandering into the school when a storm occurs and Chairman Miller said things changed after the Columbine incident and schools are more secure today than ever before; however, the idea of having 500 people in your gymnasium while you have a school full of students is frightening and would be a security issue.

Chairman Miller felt it would be impossible to provide public shelters for the entire City and Chief Fullingim agreed. Chairman Miller said she would like to talk with builders regarding storm shelters in new residential construction and Chief Fullingim said perhaps the City could offer incentives on the cost of building permits to encourage builders to install storm shelters. Councilmember Castleberry felt having a residential storm shelter would be a selling feature for homes right now. Mr. Lewis said due to high demand, a shelter ordered today would probably not be installed until spring.

Chairman Miller asked Staff to draft the resolution for Council's review. Mr. Lewis said the timing of the resolution is important and suggested waiting until fall to adopt the resolution. Chairman Miller agreed and felt after school started and before the holidays would be a good time. Councilmember Holman suggested the City have some type of outreach to apartment complexes with more than two stories to let residents know they need to find shelter on the first floor or leave the area at least an hour before an expected storm event. Mr. David Grizzle, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator, said the City already reaches out to all apartment complexes and mobile home parks providing information on many emergency issues. Chairman Miller felt continuous outreach and education would be the best way to get people to understand they need to have a personal plan.

Items submitted for the record

1. Memorandum dated July 29, 2013, from James Fullingim, Fire Chief, to Steve Lewis, City Manager
2. Central Oklahoma Emergency Management Association Regional Outdoor Warning System Guidelines
3. PowerPoint presentation entitled, "Severe Weather Preparedness," presented by James Fullingim, Fire Chief

Item 2, being:

MISCELLANEOUS DISCUSSION.

Chairman Miller promised a constituent she would mention putting computer chips in pets so they can be identified and reunited with their owners faster. This would have been very helpful after the Moore tornado since so many animals were displaced. She said Animal Welfare or Second Chance could sponsor clinics where animals could be chipped for a small fee to encourage people to have this done.

ADJOURNMENT.

The meeting adjourned at 6:55 p.m.