

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION MINUTES

January 15, 2013

The City Council of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met in a study session at 5:30 p.m. in the Municipal Building Conference Room on the 15th day of January, 2013, 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 Castleberry, Gallagher, Griffith, Kovach, Lockett, Williams, Spaulding and Mayor Rosenthal

ABSENT:

Councilmember Jungman

Item 1, being:

DISCUSSION REGARDING THE REGIONAL OUTDOOR WARNING SYSTEM POLICY AND SHELTER REQUIREMENTS.

Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager, felt it was a good practice to provide an annual update on the City of Norman's Outdoor Warning System (OWS) prior to moving into the spring-summer seasons when tornadic weather often occurs. He said discussion over the past few years regarding the City's OWS has brought about improvements to the system. Accomplishments Staff would like to achieve with tonight's presentation is to make certain elected officials understand the City's activation policy, the City's OWS capabilities, and to brief the community on how the OWS operates and when it is activated.

Mr. James Fullingim, Fire Chief, said on March 1, 2011, Council discussed and adopted the Regional Outdoor Warning System (OWS) Policy for the City of Norman. He said many other communities participate in the Regional OWS Policy, e.g., Canadian County, Del City, Edmond, Midwest City, Moore, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, and Yukon. Chief Fullingim said the Central Oklahoma Emergency Management Association worked on policy guidelines for the Regional OWS that would be consistent across Central Oklahoma jurisdictions and assist in the coordination of the activation, operation, and testing of the OWS making the system more effective, efficient, and beneficial to the public. He said each local jurisdiction determines when to activate their OWS based on a validated imminent threat and consideration of the following factors:

- National Weather Service (NWS) Tornado Warning – The NWS attempts to give a 15-minute notification, but that does not/will not always happen; it is not uncommon for weak tornados to suddenly develop and not allow a lot of lead time warning (15 minute notification). Typically, F4 & F5 tornados do not develop suddenly, but rather are watched for hours and develop slowly becoming stronger and stronger;
- Credible report of tornado conditions – must be reported by a trained storm spotter;
- Location of the hazard or threat; and
- Timing of the hazard or threat.

Chief Fullingim said 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; however, no local jurisdiction will issue an "all clear" signal. Currently, a uniformed OWS siren tone is emitted from all OWS Regional Policy participants, which is the same across the metro area; however, each local jurisdiction has a local option to activate their OWS for other hazardous conditions or threats that pose an immediate threat to life safety e.g., dam breaches, wild land fires, hazardous material incidents, or enemy attacks. Chief Fullingim said OWS is capable of issuing other siren warning tones/sounds, but before a City begins using other OWS warning tones/sounds for other hazardous events the community would need to be educated and conditioned to respond to that particular warning tone.

Chief Fullingim said Council discussions also included the possibility of warning citizens of high winds and/or damaging hail, but it became obvious there was not a "good" way to warn citizens of those particular weather events because the NWS does not provide a product that will allow the City enough lead-time to warn citizens. Until those events happen it is not known how high the winds or how big the hail will be.

OWS are designed to alert citizens who are outside/outdoors, they are not designed to penetrate buildings and warn those who are inside structures and citizens should not mistakenly wait to hear an OWS siren as their only source of warning information. A National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) All-Hazards Radio with Specific Area Message Encoding (SAME) technology is a good method of receiving warning messages indoors, as well as warnings via radio, television, subscription services using text messaging, e-mails, telephone messages, social media, and other available sources.

When Norman activates the OWS, the public should “take shelter and seek more information.” Each citizen should enact their own personal plan based on anticipated conditions and determine whether or not to go to a City sponsored storm shelter. Chief Fullingim said the City of Norman Emergency Operations Plan contains public shelter locations at the Irving Recreation Center, Whittier Recreation Center, Cleveland Elementary School, and Little Axe Recreational Center. He said the shelters have been available since 1974 due to the fact that two of the junior high schools had berms built against their gymnasiums. He said it was assumed the berms would provide a higher level of protection in the event of a tornado. Chief Fullingim said, over time, the junior high schools have been rebuilt and/or remodeled and the berms removed; however, the City continues to provide the locations as storm shelters.

Oklahoma communities that provide shelters are Norman, Shawnee (underground but not rated to withstand any type of tornado), Del City (New - Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) rated facility), and Newcastle (New FEMA rated facility). Oklahoma communities that do not provide city sponsored storm shelters are Moore, Oklahoma City, Edmond, Lawton, Stillwater, Noble, Yukon, Mustang, Midwest City, Tulsa, Broken Arrow, and Jenks. Chief Fullingim said the City of Midwest City does have FEMA rated facilities but recently made the determination that opening shelters to the public is not a safe alternative because of capacity and travel distance issues.

Chief Fullingim said there are several items the City should consider when opening the City sponsored storm shelters, e.g., average lead time for tornadoes is 15 minutes, low wind rated designated facilities, travel to public shelter places people at risk, and responsibility. The current process for severe weather activation decisions begins with Emergency Management activating a severe weather warning using information from multiple sources including information from the National Weather Service (NWS). Chief Fullingim said Staff makes every effort to ensure storm shelters are opened within one hour of anticipated tornadic activity and typically errors on the side of safety in anticipation of severe weather; therefore, it is not uncommon to open a shelter and no citizens show up. Chief Fullingim said if severe weather develops quickly, and it does on occasion, the NWS may not be able to provide a minimum 15-minute warning time and, in that event, citizens could show up at a storm shelter only to find it locked and be stuck outside with the storm bearing down. Going to a City sponsored storm shelter seems to be a lot of Norman citizen’s “personal safety plan.” Chief Fullingim said if the City is going to provide public storm shelters, the City needs to make certain the shelters are going to be available and open to the public, as well as make it clear to the public the level of safety the shelters provide. In most cases the level of safety provided at a City sponsored storm shelter is no higher than the level of safety of the place the citizen just left.

Chief Fullingim said a comparison survey of City sponsored storm shelters and residential houses was performed two years ago using the FEMA 371 Standard and while the storm shelters are not unsafe buildings, they are considered to be as safe as residential houses. He said the City sponsored storm shelters were not designed to withstand an F4 tornado and citizens traveling to these shelters place themselves at risk because their homes may be, and typically are, just as safe. Chief Fullingim said during severe weather, people should be inside a structure that will provide a level of safety and not in a car or running down the street. He said citizens tend to think the OWS siren is their clue to head to the storm shelter when in reality they are heading outside during an eminent threat of severe or tornadic weather. Another issue is that many citizens think all Norman Public Schools (NPS) are public storm shelters and will travel to them during severe weather only to find them locked.

Chief Fullingim said severe weather awareness was very high when a tornado occurred in Norman only three weeks after the Joplin, Missouri, tornado and the City sponsored storm shelters became overcrowded. He said when the shelters became full, people had to remain outside the shelter during severe weather. Some people brought their animals to the shelter, which actually caused altercations between citizens. Chief Fullingim said thousands of Norman citizens were literally roaming the City during the middle of a tornadic event looking for shelter when most of them had probably left safe shelter in the first place.

Chief Fullingim said if the threat of severe weather is approaching the City and it is determined a storm shelter needs to be opened then a firefighter, who typically does not perform security detail, staffs the storm shelter and commonly only two or four people will show up. However, if the OWS is activated then 200 to 400 people may show up at the shelter causing the probability of altercations between citizens very likely. Chief Fullingim said it may become challenging for the fireman to ensure rules are followed at the storm shelters and they may need to call for assistance from the police department. He said the police department is usually very busy during severe weather events and such calls take them away from other emergencies.

Chief Fullingim provided an update on the Residential Storm Shelter Grant Program stating it is a 75-25 matching grant program and 500 Norman citizens are attached to the grant application that will provide funds to install a storm shelter at their home. He said the grant application has been turned into the state for approval, but currently the state has no funding available for residential shelter installation and does not know when funding will be available. Chief Fullingim said state funding is tied to federally declared disasters and Oklahoma had very few disasters last year. The federal funding is used to reinforce property so if and when a future disaster should happen, the damage will be minimal. Chief Fullingim said federal funding will not be available before the 2013 storm season and suggested if any of the 500 citizens are concerned about the approaching storm season, they should install a storm shelter without the rebate.

In 2007, the City began registering residential storm shelters in Norman and 4,000 residential storm shelters have been registered to date. Chief Fullingim said citizens who have not registered their storm shelters (even if built before 2007) can do so online with the Fire Department. He said the Fire Department will enter the storm shelter's Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates so in the event of severe weather the storm shelter can be found. He said this can be helpful if the shelter is covered with debris from the storm and the door cannot be opened.

Chief Fullingim said City sponsored storm shelters are safer than apartment complexes and mobile home parks, but citizens traveling from apartments and mobile homes during severe weather pass many "safe" locations on the way to public shelters. He said a lot of citizens do not realize they have other options and/or plans available and one suggestion would be for citizens who live in apartments and/or mobile homes to identify the best available refuge area before an emergency occurs, which may include asking family or friends who live relatively close (but do not live in apartments or mobile homes), if they can shelter with them during severe weather. Chief Fullingim said people make their own best "personal safety plan" because they know what their capabilities are and whether or not family, friends, or neighbors have a storm shelter. He said a good plan would be to identify the safest place in your home by using a simple formula of finding the most central location without a window on the bottom level of the home. He said citizens can contact the Fire Department if they need help with this service.

Chief Fullingim felt continuing to keep the City sponsored storm shelters open and available to the public during severe weather places the community at-risk by making citizens believe they should get into their cars and drive to another location that is probably no safer than the one they are leaving.

Mayor Rosenthal asked if the firemen who staff the storm shelters are already on duty or are being called to come in and open the shelters. Chief Fullingim said the firemen are already on duty and leave the fire stations to open the storm shelters; however, additional firemen are then called to work at the fire stations in order to fill the position of the fireman who left to open the storm shelter. Chief Fullingim said opening storm shelters typically costs the City \$500 in overtime, etc., and while the Fire Department may end up short-staffed for a few minutes; most of the firemen are back at the station before severe weather strikes.

Councilmember Gallagher asked if the City should send the message to citizens to shelter in place and advise citizens who live in a mobile home, apartment, etc., to take severe weather precautions early so they are not traveling during a storm. Chief Fullingim said yes, the concept of sheltering in place is a philosophy that is recognized nationally, is a FEMA choice/directive, and is supported by the City of Norman. He said sheltering in place is always better than being exposed to the elements and if a citizen should find themselves in an unsafe place during severe weather, such as outdoors, the citizen should find a secure/safe place and seek further information about the threat of severe weather.

Councilmember Kovach said he has a constituent who was selected for grant funds and has been waiting over a year to receive funding from the Residential Storm Shelter Grant Program, but now has to be informed he will have to wait longer and will probably not receive funds to install a storm shelter for the upcoming tornado season. He felt the City may have done a tremendous disservice to the 500 citizens on the storm shelter waiting list since the funding may not be available for a couple of more years. He asked Staff to comment on whether the City should continue the program and/or inform citizens the funding is not available. Chief Fullingim said the City has had similar storm shelter grant programs in the past, but the rules and guidelines for the current grant program have changed. The 500 citizens had to become part of the City's application which required them do a lot of work in advance, thus setting the stage for them to believe they would receive money soon thereafter to install a storm shelter. Chief Fullingim said past processes included the City making application for the program and then the City was given the funding and/or guidelines. He said the City would then go out into the community and distribute the money to citizens who qualified for storm shelters. Chief Fullingim agreed the process would have been much easier and much less painful if the previous rules/guidelines could have been used.

Councilmember Kovach said Staff has been suggesting citizens shelter in place for several years but felt the City could continue to offer public shelters for those needing a safer place. He said Whittier Recreation Center would be a good option for the nearby mobile home residents to utilize during severe weather. He suggested the City research the location of the City sponsored storm shelters in respect to nearby places such as mobile home parks, apartments, etc., and discuss whether or not the shelters should remain open for that particular area.

Councilmember Kovach asked Staff if the City can activate the OWS in zones that are close to adjoining counties who may be experiencing severe weather. For example, if severe weather is in McClain County, can the City of Norman activate the OWS for the region of the City that borders McClain County versus waiting until the severe weather has entered Cleveland County and Chief Fullingim said the OWS is currently set up in zones and can be activated as such. He said Staff primarily anticipates activating the OWS zones in a pattern from east to west and can make the zone areas smaller, but doing so can become very time consuming during what is commonly a rapidly developing weather situation. Chief Fullingim said severe storms generally travel from the west to east across Norman but there are occasions when storms come from the south through the Noble area and travel through east Norman in which case there is no real reason to set off the OWS in town.

Councilmember Spaulding asked if Staff is familiar with legislation requiring mobile home parks to provide shelters for their residents and Chief Fullingim said he is aware of the proposed legislation but thinks existing mobile home parks will not have to install shelters. Chief Fullingim said about half of the mobile home parks in Norman have sheltering potential for their residents, although some may not be large enough for all the residents and some are being utilized as storage facilities.

Mr. Jeff Bryant, City Attorney, said the City has an ethical responsibility to make shelters available if the City claims and/or chooses to continue utilizing the current shelters. Councilmember Spaulding agreed and felt the City needed to inform citizens that the City sponsored shelters are not actually *storm* shelters. He said he is concerned that providing City sponsored storm shelters can be a disservice because citizens have to travel to shelters which places them in danger and if the shelters are overcrowded, citizens may not be able to go inside them, instead having to remain outside in severe weather. He said police officers and firefighters are needed for emergencies pertaining to and stemming from severe weather rather than opening and keeping the peace at public shelters.

Councilmember Lockett felt the City needs to concentrate on educating people regarding the OWS, developing their own personal safety plan, and staying informed of potential severe weather (which may include sheltering in place and/or using a NOAA radio) versus going to public shelters.

Councilmember Griffith said if the City decides not to staff public storm shelters during severe weather how should that be conveyed to the citizens. He asked whether the City would continue staffing shelters through the spring 2013 storm season. Chief Fullingim said it is his opinion the City is currently providing a false sense of security because citizens have heard about the storm shelters and rely on them instead of developing a personal safety plan. He said Norman's Emergency Operation Plan states the City of Norman provides the four locations during severe weather. Chief Fullingim felt Council

action would be needed if the City decided to no longer provide public storm shelters which would generate media coverage. He said Staff could be prepared to address the issue and since the storm season is still a couple months away, assist citizens in developing their own personal safety plan. Another option could be to close all the public storm shelters except Whittier Recreation Center as Councilmember Kovach suggested, because of its close proximity to a mobile home park, which would be safer for those citizens. The Whittier Recreation Center could be phased out allowing those citizens more time to develop a personal safety plan. Chief Fullingim felt the City should not wait another year before closing the shelters because waiting allows people to keep putting off developing a safety plan of their own.

Mayor Rosenthal requested Staff identify shelter locations near mobile home parks and/or apartment complexes because they would be reasonable shelter solutions for those citizens. She said the City could work with the mobile home parks and apartment complexes to create a safety plan rather than phasing out the shelters. She agreed the shelters give citizens a false sense of security and suggested police officers and firefighters proactively work on educating and helping citizens develop safety plans. Chief Fullingim said the Fire Department will be handing out free smoke detectors, as well as severe weather planning brochures, at Norman mobile home parks on Saturday, February 23, 2013. He said Staff is currently working on a strategy to assist those who may need NOAA radios. Chief Fullingim said the Fire Department provides annual fire inspections to apartment complexes in Norman and Staff can incorporate severe weather planning education while performing the fire inspections.

Councilmember Kovach agreed with Councilmember Lockett that emphasis needs to be put on public education and sheltering in place. He felt if the City is diligent then eventually citizens will not be traveling across town to public storm shelters. He said the City should create a severe weather public education plan as well as assist citizens with their own personal safety plan before closing the shelters. He felt opening Whittier Recreation Center during severe weather is a good alternative for citizens at the nearby mobile home park and the City should continue to do so for at least the next year (storm season) while working with and educating identified areas of Norman on safer places to shelter.

Councilmember Griffith asked if the City could apply for FEMA grant funding to assist citizens who cannot afford NOAA radios. Chief Fullingim said Staff applied for, but was denied a Homeland Security Grant for that purpose, but will continue to seek other funding for the NOAA radios and he anticipates some type of assistance in the future. Councilmember Lockett said part of the public education should include how important it is to get NOAA radios tuned for specific areas.

Mayor Rosenthal asked if Council consensus is to close the shelters with the exception of Whittier Recreation Center and Councilmembers said yes. She requested Staff examine the "at risk" areas such as mobile home parks and/or apartments near the other three shelter locations and help those areas determine the best solution for severe weather safety. Councilmember Gallagher agreed, stating the City needed to look at areas in the community that may be able to utilize the shelters if they do not have a personal place to shelter. Councilmember Griffith requested Fire Department staff survey the areas around the mobile home parks and apartments (while handing out smoke detectors and/or conducting fire inspections) and identify the closest schools that could serve as shelters during severe weather.

Ms. Joy Hampton, The Norman Transcript, asked if severe weather/storm safe rooms will be built in new City facilities such as the Eastside Library Branch and Mayor Rosenthal said while Staff is identifying shelter solutions for "at risk" areas that issue will certainly be included in the planning and future discussions.

Mr. John High, 1705 Dakota Street, said people who rent homes are going to need public shelters because the landlords are not likely to install a storm shelter at the rental house. He asked how many shelters were shut down prior to last year to cause so much overcrowding and felt lower levels were safer than a residential space such as a closet. Chief Fullingim said only recreation centers at the schools, (Irving and Whittier), *not the school*, are opened during severe weather and, on occasion, citizens will go to the school instead of the recreation center. He said when the citizens find the school locked they call 911 and inform the Police Department that the storm shelter is not open when actually the recreation center is open. Chief Fullingim said another issue has been that citizens may have, at one time, gained entry to schools during severe weather because school personnel and/or school janitors were present and let them inside. He said now those citizens

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assume the school is a City sponsored shelter because they were let inside before and the next time severe weather occurred they return to the school only to find it locked. Chief Fullingim said it is a common problem for people to gain entry to schools, whether during or after school hours, that are not designated shelters and felt there is some citizen confusion regarding where the City sponsored shelters are located.

Mayor Rosenthal requested the City Manager work with Norman Public Schools to clarify their severe weather policies with respect to school availability and access issues.

Items submitted for the record

1. Central Oklahoma Emergency Management Association Regional Outdoor Warning System Guidelines dated February 2011
2. City Council Study Session Minutes dated March 1, 2011
3. Central Region of the Oklahoma Emergency Management Association Public Storm Shelter Position Statement
4. Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) U.S. Department of Homeland Security Residential Sheltering: In-Residence and Stand-Alone Shelters dated August 2007
5. PowerPoint presentation entitled, "Tornado Season Warning and Public Shelters Update," presented by James, Fullingim, Fire Chief

Participants in discussion

1. Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager
2. Mr. James Fullingim, Fire Chief
3. Mr. Jeff Bryant, City Attorney
4. Mr. John High, 1705 Dakota Street, made comments

The meeting adjourned at 6:37 p.m.

ATTEST:

City Clerk

Mayor