

April 11, 2016

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION ITEM

SUBJECT

Discussion of the progress of the False Alarm Reduction Program (FARP) in the first six months of implementation, and options for proceeding with the program while retaining the ultimate goal of reducing false alarms within the City.

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POLICY ISSUES

Should the City of Bellevue evaluate alternative options for proceeding with the reduction of false alarms within the City after evaluating the effectiveness of the first six months of the False Alarm Reduction Program?

DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL

 Action

 X Discussion

 X Information

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS

In 2014, Bellevue Police Department handled approximately 3,300 false alarms per year, which equates to 1,700 hours of patrol time. Approximately 98% of these alarm calls responded to by the police were false. While a False Alarm Ordinance was previously enacted in 1977, and later amended in 2004, the Police Department had been operating without an active false alarm monitoring program since 2011. Bellevue False Alarm Ordinance 6214 was adopted on December 8, 2014, repealing the 1977 version, and the resulting monitoring program went into effect in October 2015.

The intent of the False Alarm Ordinance is to hold alarm users and companies accountable for their false alarms, recover the City's costs of responding to false alarms, and to provide an incentive for the alarm monitoring companies and users to reduce false alarms. The desired objective is to free police resources from responding to false alarms and direct them to proactive policing and availability for other calls. TO date, the overall effectiveness of the new Ordinance has resulted in a decrease in the number of false alarm calls. Since implementation of the current program there have been 191 fewer false alarm calls (October 2015-March 2016) compared to the same period last year, a 9.3% reduction. This reduction equates to 96 hours of officer time that was not spent responding to false alarms. This is a significant improvement and staff anticipates that the reduction in false alarms will continue as the program develops. To date, 8,417 alarms have been registered in the City.

On or about May 1, 2015, the City entered into a services contract with the Public Safety Corporation (PSC) to administer a false alarm management program using a software system called "CryWolf." The Police Department began implementation of FARP on July 6, 2015 by educating the public and sending out registration information to monitored alarm users. Actual collection of registration fees and false alarm fines began on October 1, 2015. Billing and collection was suspended in December 2015 and resumed on March 1, 2016.

Upon implementation of the program, the City began receiving numerous complaints regarding the ordinance, the program, customer service by the outside vendor, and the cost of fines/fees. A breakdown of the Police Department's logged complaints for the last two months show a majority of the complaints are regarding the false alarm costs:

- 25% - Primarily focused on how to navigate the PSC website to complete registration and make appropriate payments
- 70% - Primarily the Annual Registration fee and Fail to Register fee
- < 1% - Privacy issues/personally identifying information
- 5% - Basic understanding/confusion about program

In November 2015, City Council directed the Police Department to evaluate the services contract with PSC and to send a 30-day demand letter to cure the perceived deficiencies that were causing constituent frustration. The Police Department sent PSC a certified letter on December 8, 2015, demanding they address six main areas of concern and complete eight tasks to attempt to correct the deficiencies. PSC had until January 8, 2016 to implement the changes. PSC's CEO, George Wilson, responded to the Police Department in a timely manner and has implemented all of the City's requested changes. Also, in December 2015, the City discovered that PSC was charging alarm users a late fee that was not authorized by the Ordinance. All billings for failing to register were suspended until the billing error was corrected. PSC refunded customers the overpayments and have corrected their billing practices. Issuance of false alarm Civil Violations were also temporarily suspended until all of the FARP forms and notices were reviewed and approved by the City. Notices and billing resumed on March 1, 2016. Since resuming billing, there have been only four appeals set before the hearing examiner. The Department believes appeals will continue to be minimal due to the process and authority to waive by the alarm detective, written in the ordinance.

PSC has addressed the following complaints since receiving the City's demand to cure letter:

- PSC's Notices were not in accordance with the Ordinance.
 - PSC now sends all forms and notices to the Police Department for review before use
 - All notices now comply with the False Alarm Ordinance requirements, including Due Process language
- The PSC Bellevue alarm program website and toll-free phone hotline was inoperable for a period of time and Alarm Users have reported multiple attempts to register online and have failed to do so due to technical website issues.
 - PSC's communication protocol for when their website and phone line is down has been updated
 - PSC now provides outgoing toll-free phone message and website notice when PSC's offices are closed (i.e. holidays, weekends, normal closed business hours)
 - Technical web issues have been fixed

- Alarm Users have reported that they are unsure whether or not the program is real.
 - All mailings sent to alarm users or alarm businesses have the official City of Bellevue and Bellevue Police Department logos on them to show materials are City of Bellevue mailings
 - PSC now refers to itself as “AOT Public Safety Corporation” or “Public Safety Corporation” rather than “CryWolf”

The Police Department also has modified processes to address some of the constituent complaints:

- Required that all forms/mailings be reviewed and approved by the department’s legal advisor prior to use
- Check payments are now accepted for registrations and infractions at the City’s Service First desk
- The updated registration process no longer requires personally identifying information such as driver’s license number or full date of birth (year of birth is still required to claim senior citizen reduced cost)
- Created a City phone line just for false alarm issues
- Created tutorials of the FARP process to be provided to the public and other City staff
- Increased public awareness by creating a designated FARP webpage on the Police Department website
- Educated staff on the Ordinance and false alarm program
- Increased public outreach at community meetings and the sector captains program
- Trained other City staff on how to address False Alarm concerns/complaints
- Sent its Crime Prevention detective to the False Alarm Reduction Association conference earlier this year to assess the current state of the alarm industry and strategies adopted by other agencies and jurisdictions, thereby increasing the breadth of knowledge on ways to effectively run a false alarm program

The Police Department has one full-time Crime Prevention detective tasked with assisting and coordinating the program, and serving as a liaison with PSC. Outsourcing the administration of the program is a more efficient strategy to manage the various tasks associated with the Ordinance, and frees up police resources to focus on more direct public safety responsibilities. During this first year, the Crime Prevention detective spent a majority of her work days focused on false alarm issues. The outsourcing of this program was meant to free the detective’s time, not to add work. The Police Department has attempted to address this issue by training other department members on how to address false alarm concerns/complaints and by creating a website that addresses the most frequently asked questions and processes.

Through the implementation of the FARP, triggers for false alarms have been identified. Some alarm users and the alarm company identified technical malfunctions that were triggering multiple false alarms. Those technical issues have been fixed with the alarm systems and have ceased.

The FARP’s start-up issues have been addressed, and issues, complaints, and customer dissatisfaction have diminished in the past month. While the department does not expect complaints to cease completely, it does believe that PSC and the Police Department have successfully dealt with the program’s initial shortcomings experienced in the initial implementation period.

ALTERNATIVES TO CONSIDER REGARDING THE FUTURE OF THE PROGRAM

1. Continue with the FARP, administered by PSC.

Continue the program, including close monitoring of the relationship with PSC to ensure any constituent complaints are being addressed.

2. Continue with the FARP, but amend the False Alarm Ordinance.

Continue with the program, but with Council direction, return to Council with a proposed amendment to the False Alarm Ordinance with changes to the registration fee structure to address constituent complaints regarding the annual permit fee. Amendments would either (1) require no registration fee, (2) reduce the registration fee amount, (3) eliminate the fee but keep the failure to register penalty if the department must respond to an active unregistered alarm; or (4) require a one-time registration fee rather than annual fee. The department could also propose expanding the program to apply to any type of signal that can elicit a law enforcement response, rather than limiting the program only to monitored alarms. If Council direction is to completely eliminate the registration fee, there is the risk that PSC would not have updated, current information for infraction billings.

RECOMMENDATION

Option 2.

ATTACHMENT

Ordinance 6214