

Contra Costa County Approves Contract for Warning System That Had Malfunctioned



A section of Chevron's Richmond oil refinery. (Josh Cassidy/KQED)

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SHARE

Contra Costa County supervisors have approved a new contract with the company that runs its massive community warning system more than two months after it malfunctioned near Richmond's Chevron refinery, outraging that city's mayor.

The county's Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to back the five-year, \$3.8 million software maintenance contract with San Mateo-based AtHoc Inc., a division of Blackberry Limited.

The [warning system](#) includes dozens of control centers, sirens and communication systems that notify members of the community in case of emergencies.

But it failed on Aug. 16.

Three of the system's sirens near the Chevron refinery sounded off accidentally for three minutes, telling thousands of people to stay inside their homes.

Officials confirmed there was no emergency and sent out an advisory alert over the phone and online, but [some residents said they did not receive that notification quickly enough.](#)

On the day of the malfunction, Richmond Mayor Tom Butt issued a statement criticizing the warning program.

“By my count, the Community Warning System, which has been operating (if you can call it that) since the mid 1990s, has never actually worked the way it was intended,” Butt said. “Some of that is on those responsible for reporting or activating it. Much of it is due to flaws in the system design and management.”

Butt’s beef with the system, though, does not seem to be directed at the company that runs it, but instead its organizational structure, which [the mayor labeled “bizarre” a week later.](#)

He declined, through a spokesman, to comment on the AtHoc contract.

AtHoc officials say the August mishap took place as the company’s technicians were installing a new backup siren. One of the workers inadvertently left an activation unit in “test mode,” according to Blackberry spokeswoman Jennifer O’Brien.

“We acted immediately upon learning about the false alarm and removed the backup unit from service, and the unit has since been reinstated correctly,” O’Brien said.

“To prevent this situation from occurring again, we have added more safeguards,” she said, adding that the company’s technicians would get more training, and their work would get additional peer reviews.

Supervisor John Gioia had questions about the malfunction, prompting the board to pull the contract from its Oct. 18 meeting.

That led to a hearing before the board’s Public Protection Committee a week later.

At that meeting, several officials with the Sheriff’s Department and the warning system’s company discussed the malfunction.

In written comments submitted to committee for that hearing, the Sheriff’s Department revealed that the AtHoc technicians who were doing

the work that led to the false activation were not aware that sirens had sounded off until the warning system's manager told them.

The committee sent the contract to the full board on Tuesday, and it was passed on the consent calendar, which covers items that are not considered controversial.

The warning system was criticized in the weeks after the massive Chevron refinery fire of 2012 after [problems emerged](#) about its alerts, sirens and phone calls the evening of that emergency.

The county made efforts to improve the system, something federal investigators noted in their [final report](#) on the fire last year.