

A tick-tock of the Richmond fire: Did responders, alerts arrive fast enough?

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In Richmond, response to Tuesday night's scrap yard fire is in the eye of the beholder.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt was no fan of the Contra Costa Community Warning System, and never has been.

"As far as I'm concerned, it never worked," Butt said of the system that came under, er, fire during the Chevron refinery release in 2012 — to the point that supervisors John Gioia and Federal Glover were tasked with reviewing the system.

"Here is what I am concerned about," Butt wrote in an email blast. "It was 47 minutes after the 911 call went out to Richmond Fire Department before (RFD) contacted the Community Warning System. By then, the fire was fully engulfed, and black smoke was visible all over Richmond. People wanted to know what is going on."

According to Butt, the first alert was issued at 6:20 p.m.

"I don't see that that's a failure," Gioia said. "Richmond Fire informed the county at 5:55, and the county's first alert was 6:08. Then they started making calls."

So there is a 12-minute discrepancy regarding the first alert. It matters, given that 12 minutes must seem like hours when your neighborhood is being smothered with a toxic black cloud.

On Wednesday, the day after the fire, the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office chimed in with a news release asserting that the Community Warning System "functioned properly."

"Mayor Butt's statement that it took an hour to get out the first alert after receiving the necessary information from Richmond Fire is totally inaccurate, misleading, and presumptuous," the release read in part.

As it happened, Butt attended a conference Friday where the Wine Country fires were discussed. "One of the big problems there was notifications," he said. "People weren't getting the word. This issue of alerts and notifications is a problem everywhere."

Again, perception. Tuesday's fire was a health menace. Both Butt, who moved to Richmond in 1973, and Gioia, who has lived there since he was 10, said this was one of the worst toxic events they had ever known. In a situation like that, help can't come fast enough no matter how fast it's coming.

"People are hungry for information," Butt said. "It's frustrating. You get shelter-in-place warnings and you don't know if an atom bomb went off or what."

Gioia assures that there is a protocol designed to bring clarity from chaos.

"The way it goes, it's the responsibility of the facility or the first responders to report to the county," he said. "Richmond Fire arrives on scene, is fighting the fire and assessing the situation. They would determine would this have an offsite impact and where."

Meanwhile the fire is growing and a shifting wind is steering it toward various neighborhoods.

"It wasn't until 5:55 that the sheriff issued the press release and asked the county to send out an alert," Gioia said. "Richmond Fire made the recommendation to shelter in place in a defined area. At 6:08 the county sent out its first alert by phone. They draw a line around affected neighborhoods and there is a 911 reverse database. Only landlines are in the database unless you register your cellphone.

"It's important after an event like this to get the full timeline. When were they on scene, when did hazmat inspectors arrive, what was happening at that time? You evaluate and determine, can the system be better?"

The fire resulted in no injuries and no reported property damage. That's a pretty good outcome. Of course when you're sheltering in place — Butt compared it to "forcible abduction" in his email — pretty good will never be good enough.