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CHIP JOHNSON

Sirens key to East Bay alert system After 9/11, Oakland expanded capability

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Alameda County residents approved a 1992 bond measure to create a coordinated early warning system against fire danger, but never considered it a tool in the arsenal against terrorism.

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But since the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon, human-caused disasters, as well as natural ones, have become a primary concern.

And with a war with Iraq brewing, the nation on orange alert status, the second-highest threat level issued under the Office of Homeland Security, the sound of sirens may soon become a regular event for residents from San Leandro to the Contra Costa County line.

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Chip Johnson
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The first test run last week in San Leandro, Alameda, Oakland and at UC Berkeley was a modest start. While the sirens reached across the university campus and the two smaller cities, most Oakland residents never heard them -- but they will.

"We ramped up the project because the (city) council recognized there were other threats out there," said Henry Renteria, Oakland's emergency operations director.

The alarms were originally designed to warn of fire danger, but the Oakland city council, soon after the terrorist attacks, approved a plan to expand the system from 9 to 27 siren towers to cover the entire city.

And Oakland isn't the only local body thinking about homeland defense.

Within two days of the first test run last week, Emeryville, Piedmont, Albany and Berkeley asked to join the program, Renteria said.

When completed, the system will be tested the first Wednesday of every month at noon. Residents are instructed to secure themselves wherever they are and listen for further information.

Warning sirens have long been used in communities with special safety concerns, including in Contra Costa County

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to warn residents of potentially dangerous chemical accidents, but are no longer common in many U.S. cities.

San Francisco still relies on 40 World War II-era air raid sirens designed to be heard outside. They cannot be heard from downtown office buildings and finding parts for the antiquated system is tough, said Lucien Canton, the city's director of emergency operations.

Without providing details, Canton said the city relies on more modern technology to anchor its early warning system.

Whether the regular siren tests are a new experience for younger residents or recall a past era for older ones, they are just another reflection of a Cold War feeling around the nation.

How else do you explain biological weapons attack drills in a courthouse in Alexandria, Va.?

Or federal officials using airplanes to dump egg whites and "other materials" over the town of Grisby, Okla., last week to stage a mock biological attack. The test was held to determine if the National Weather Service can use Doppler radar systems to track the cloud.

And some experts question whether the traditional siren systems will provide adequate alert -- or be taken seriously by a skeptical American public.

"It's the wrong way to go because it won't be all that effective," said Lee Clarke, a sociology professor at Rutgers University and author on books about disaster and disaster planning.

"We know from 40 or 50 years of disaster research that people don't automatically follow their leaders," he said. "They pay attention, if they find them credible."

Having more siren towers in the East Bay is a good overall safety measure but should be part of a broader network that includes providing information to block captains and neighborhood leaders, the people who are most like first responders in a disaster, Clarke advised.

"The general public will pay attention to warnings but they must believe the warning and it has to be specific enough for people to present them with options.

"And they can't help without concrete training and real involvement on how to prepare," Clarke said.

"After Sept. 11, we're all walking on eggshells, but we know . . . that people rarely panic in Hollywood movie disaster style," he said.

"In real life, you help your neighbor, even it doesn't make for a good movie."

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