

False alarms trigger response

Law enforcement, cities consider enacting penalties

By Dan Abendschein and Alfred Lee
Staff Writers

Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies responded to a staggering 117,248 alarm calls in 2007.

Though the department does not know what percentage of those calls were false, local officers say most calls usually turn out to be an accidental triggering of the alarm.

"A lot of man hours are wasted on each false alarm," said Deputy Hector Figueroa of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. "We have to take each call seriously, but we know most of the time they won't amount to anything."

While alarm companies have argued that having police follow up on alarms service is a deterrent for crime, academics who have studied the issue have come to a different conclusion.

"Under current conditions, police response to false alarms yields no benefits to the community," according to a 2002 report by Temple University researchers. "Instead, response is an earmarked service to the alarm owner that slows overall police response because of the large number of false alarms."

Concerned by the costs of false alarms to fire and police departments, city officials have come up with several ways to find funds to offset the costs.

In Arcadia, officials are ready to increase fees on homes and businesses because of the persistent problems with false alarms.

Last year, about 97 percent of the 2,600 security alarms the Arcadia Police Department responded to

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Fee proposal draws criticism

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turned out to be false alarms, according to staff reports.

Each response to a false alarm costs the city approximately \$175, adding up to about \$453,000 and 1,600 man hours.

"There are a lot of city resources that are being utilized for false alarms," City Manager Don Penman said. "It doesn't really benefit the general community. It benefits those people who for whatever reason choose to have an alarm. The staff position is that there should be some reimbursement for that cost."

On Tuesday, the Arcadia City Council will consider an ordinance seeking to cut down false alarms by reducing the grace period for repeated false alarms, increasing fines for false alarms, and implementing an annual registration fee for all alarm users.

The council would also decide on how to configure the fees. The main proposal would introduce a \$40 annual alarm permit fee for users. A \$100 fee would be charged for a third false burglary alarm in a 365-day period; \$200 for a fourth; and \$300 for all subsequent false alarms. Other options would lower the annual fee as far as \$25 per year, but raise false alarm fees.

Currently, the city does not charge an alarm permit fee, and allows for three free false alarms per year. Fourth and fifth false alarms are charged \$100, and subsequent ones \$200.

Cities that do charge an alarm permit fee include Azusa, Claremont, Covina, El Monte, Glendora, La Verne, Los Angeles, Montebello, Monterey Park, Pasadena, Pomona, Sierra Madre and Whittier.

Penman said the city also looked into a "verified response program," such as the one used in Fontana.

Under Fontana's program, police will not respond to an alarm call until it has been verified as authentic. Methods of verification include audio recording, video surveillance and on-site verification from a security officer or eyewitness.

"We don't recommend that approach because we believe

residents would want police to respond," Penman said. "That's one of the reasons we're proposing to charge an annual permit fee. They're really getting a service that no one else in town gets ... the vast majority of people in town don't have alarms."

In West Covina, officials pushed the idea of charging a fee for dialing 9-1-1 last month as a way to bring revenue to the city.

The West Covina City Council did not go for the idea: it voted against taking any further action on the ordinance.

The ordinance was suggested partly to deal with the cost of a new upgraded emergency radio system. But City Manager Andrew Pasmant said the ordinance was also to deal with the false alarm problems.

"We can charge a fee for alarms, or penalize residents for false alarms, but our police department still spends a lot of time responding to false alarm calls," said Pasmant.

The city responded to 4,113 alarm calls in 2007, a total that amounts to over 10 a day.

Part of the reason the ordinance may have failed is that it would have been enacted only if legal challenges to other cities' 9-1-1 fees were resolved favorably.

The city of Ventura instituted a subscription-based fee of \$1.49 a month earlier this year. Those that choose not to sign up would have to pay a \$50 fee for every 9-1-1 call. Santa Cruz, in northern California, passed a similar ordinance.

The key for West Covina, said Pasmant, is to see if the ordinances survive legal challenges.

"I believe the state court ruled in favor of one city, and against the other," said Pasmant. "There are still appeals pending, so it is very unclear whether any ordinance will be legal or not."

Ordinances that mandate fees or call for reductions in 9-1-1 services also can be very unpopular with city residents.

In 2003, Los Angeles considered instituting a verified response policy. The policy was proposed by Police Chief William Bratton, who argued that the calls were a drain on city resources.

Angry residents denounced the policy as a danger to city residents, and the City Council did not pass it.

dan.abendschein@sgvn.com
alfred.lee@sgvn.com
(626) 962-8811, Ext. 4451,
Ext. 4496