

Emergency Officials Say Texts, Not Sirens, More Effective for Tornado Alerts

BY: Richard M. Barron, News & Record, Greensboro, N.C. | April 30, 2018



(TNS) - There's nothing like a dramatic chorus of sirens sounding around a city to announce looming disasters.

But Guilford County doesn't have a siren system that could have warned people before a tornado struck east Greensboro on April 15.

And the county's emergency management director says that's not a bad thing — texts and emails are much more likely to break through the distractions and alert people that something wicked is headed this way.

“Sirens can be loud if you're underneath them,” said Don Campbell, Guilford County Emergency Management director. “They're really not designed to warn you if you're inside a building.”

Other counties across the state also are veering away from sirens to warn of emergencies.

Houses have never been more energy efficient, and quiet, inside, Campbell said. People are a lot less likely to hear a siren if they're secure inside their homes or cars but vulnerable nonetheless.

So the county has for several years operated the Guilford Emergency Alert, Notification, and Information system — GEANI.

Along with the National Weather Service, GEANI can provide weather watches and alerts.

The weather service pushes extreme weather alerts to cell phones in areas most likely to be hit by a tornado, flood or other potential disaster.

On the day of the Guilford County storm, GEANI pushed out this alert at 3:05 p.m.: “A Tornado Watch has been issued for your area.” That was followed at 4:36 by this alert: “A Severe Thunderstorm Warning has been issued for your area.”

About 7,000 people are signed up for Guilford County’s alert system. The broader National Weather Service system works through cell providers to send specific weather alerts to all people who might be affected by an event.

Campbell said the tornado developed quickly around 5 p.m., and the National Weather Service sent out its tornado warning through the county system as well as its own.

The tornado “really kind of developed right over the Pleasant Garden and Greensboro area, and as soon as the weather service identified that it really looked like a tornado we had the warning out within a minute of that,” Campbell said. “I really would’ve liked a longer lead time but that would require a better crystal ball on the part of the Weather Service.”

In all, the EF2 tornado covered 16 miles through Guilford County in less than 20 minutes and was done by 5:25 p.m., according to a summary from the weather service.

Campbell said Guilford County has studied putting in a siren system several times in the past 20 years but “the cost of the upfront capital and the cost of ongoing maintenance are way more than the utility they would offer.”

Weather watch alerts are automated, he said, and local law enforcement agencies have the option to send manual alerts if they want to tell people to shelter in place for an active shooter or other situation.

Amber alerts are also sent over the system but “weather is by far the highest volume of notifications we send out,” Campbell said.

Any siren system for Guilford County would have to cover 644 square miles of varied terrain, much of it covered with dense foliage.

“We were looking at 150 to 300 sirens to cover the area,” Campbell said. “The up-front cost was well into the millions if not tens of millions of dollars.”

He said in 2010 the county looked at sirens again when an EF3 tornado hit High Point and damaged 675 houses but the conclusion was the same. An alert system through TV, radio, computer email and cell phones is still the most practical and effective.

Guilford is now one of many counties across the state that use text, email, radio and TV alerts instead of the old-tech siren.

The Charlotte area has a siren system in place to warn of trouble from Duke Energy’s two nearby nuclear stations but it does not double as a weather warning system, said Ben Wooten, an emergency management planner with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Management.

“We are very much like Guilford County in linking in with the National Weather Service mass notification,” Wooten said.

He said similar systems operate near Guilford County including in Alamance, Forsyth and Davidson counties.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg plans to renew the contract with the company that provides its alert service later this year and it will have a strong emphasis on forwarding National Weather Service alerts, Wooten said.

“They’re the most true messages that we can get to the public in the fastest manner,” he said.

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