

Low Power AM Emergency Advisory Radio System

What it is

Hundreds of communities across the United States now operate their own emergency radio stations specifically to tell citizens what to do during flash floods, AMBER alerts, hazardous materials emergencies, terrorist threats, tornados, and other critical emergencies. This allows emergency managers to provide citizens up-to-the-minute reports, alerts and instructions with a level of timeliness and detail that can greatly improve community safety when disaster strikes.

During non-emergency times, the stations can inform listeners about street repairs, upcoming events, and even visitor information. There is a limit to the number of minutes available for all types of prerecorded messages and that limit varies by vendor.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licenses emergency and public information radio stations to broadcast non-commercial, voice messages on the AM radio band. FCC rules provide a 10-year, renewable license in the community's name and a 9.3-mile protection zone inside which no other community can operate on the same frequency.

The effective range for one station is a 3-to-5 mile radius. Synchronized transmitters can be added to expand the coverage area. Reception of the low-power (10 watt) AM radio signal is better on a vehicle radio, as opposed to an AM receiver in a building.

The geographic shape of our City seems to indicate that a two-transmitter system would be necessary to provide adequate coverage to our residents. Fire Station 1 and Fire Station 3 have been identified as the optimal sites (City owned, power available, fiber available) for best coverage.

Working with other entities

Prior to the release of RFP No. 04-20 City staff checked with other entities in the area to determine their interest in the project. At that time no other entity had money budgeted so the RFP was let by the City. All proposals received exceeded the City's budget. While staff was analyzing what could be cut from the project and/or where additional funds might be found we were contacted by the staff of the Brazos County Emergency Communication District (Brazos 911) about partnering on the project. Brazos 911 offered to pay for one primary transmitter in College Station, one primary transmitter in Bryan and three primary transmitters in Brazos County outside the two cities.

An Interlocal Agreement between City of College Station, City of Bryan, Brazos County and Brazos 911 concerning the purchase, operation and maintenance of a low power AM emergency advisory radio system was approved by City of College Station City Council August 26, 2004. Once all entities had approved the Interlocal Agreement, City staff began to negotiate with the vendor. It was necessary to get approval from TxDOT for the signage proposed by the vendor. This took several months and resulted in the removal of signage from what the vendor would supply. Then the vendor determined that the construction related components of the proposed contract would cause their costs to rise and they would not continue negotiations without altering the proposed costs. At this point City staff determined that purchasing regulations would require the City to deny all proposals and reissue an RFP.

Staff has contacted the other parties and they will work with City staff in drafting a joint RFP for the low power AM emergency advisory radio systems.