

Sound of silence

By Brady Delander | Staff writer | June 18, 2009 11:11



Grocery store employee Matthew Kukkonen arranges a display of Weather Alert Radios Tuesday at King Soopers at the southwest corner of 104th Avenue and Federal Boulevard in Westminster. The weather alert radios can be programmed to deliver localized weather updates, or have pre-set alarms notify sleeping owners of an impending tornado warning. Photo by Jon Brodhacker

The city of Brighton installed an expensive outdoor emergency warning system four years ago, at the request of its citizens, that delivers an audible warning of an impending tornado or other dangers with a droning, high-pitched, 70-decible whine.

Brighton is a rarity along the Front Range.

More than half of all towns and cities east of the Rocky Mountains don't have tornado sirens, and most don't plan to install any in the near future. Thornton, Northglenn, Westminster, Federal Heights and Adams County are among north metro locations that don't have such a system.

Brighton had a system in place, originally built as air-raid sirens during World War II, but it went silent years ago and was all but forgotten. However, enough calls came in from

residents that the city opted to spend approximately \$408,000 to get its nine sirens operating.

The warning system has gotten a workout recently as several tornadoes have touched down in the north metro area and a dozen or more funnel clouds have been spotted in the skies the past few weeks.

But the sirens are more often a source of confusion rather than information.

"The downside is we set those off and people go running outside looking for funnel clouds. That's exactly what we don't want them to do," said Cathie Johnson, communications coordinator for Brighton. "The sirens are a (no-win) situation."

Modern technology provides other ways to receive tornado and weather warnings, said emergency management officials across the state - television and radio stations cut into regular programming during severe storms; weather alert radios are available at a low cost and provide localized information; storms can be tracked in real-time online; and people can subscribe to text-message or cell-phone alert systems.

Thornton looked into an outdoor emergency warning system about 10 years ago but scrapped the idea after a \$300,000 estimate came back, according to Todd Barnes, communications manager for the city.

Brighton is one of the exceptions of an area city with a modern outdoor emergency warning system, along with Commerce City, which installed 16 warning towers at a cost of \$450,000 in 2004.

"In urban areas, it's much more difficult to hear the sirens, and many people simply don't pay attention," said Mike Kercheval, the Adams County Office of Emergency Management director. "For a tornado, we would hope that people would have invested in the few dollars that it takes to buy a weather radio."

Adams County examined the cost of installing an emergency warning system to cover all populated areas several years ago and came back with an estimate of \$10 million.

"It is not on our high-priority list right now," Kercheval said.

Kercheval and others say citizens should be proactive when it comes to protecting themselves from severe weather.

Mike Reddy, captain of emergency management for the Westminster Fire Department, said Mother Nature often provides enough warning for those people who are caught outside during severe weather.

"To me it's like lightning. If you are out playing golf and there is lightning, it's best to go inside where it's safe," Reddy said. "Tornado sirens are a very expensive investment that it turns out are used three weeks out of the year.

With all the media coverage and alternative approaches, there are more effective ways for people to be notified."

Reddy added that the information he gets from dispatch about severe weather can be found on the local news channel or Internet.

Colorado does not regulate the way emergency messages are delivered to the public.

The process begins when the National Weather Service issues a weather-related warning of some sort, for instance a tornado warning. The Colorado Bureau of Investigation is notified and begins to disperse the information to area sheriff's offices and city police departments.

Local dispatchers then decide whether or not to trigger tornado sirens, if available. From that point, within a couple minutes of the warning being issued, the message is transmitted over weather radios, local radio and television stations, and available via the Internet.

"The best practice is to monitor a number of warning systems," said Brandon Williams, public information officer for the state Division of Emergency Management. "Tornado sirens are just one means to notify the public. Local and state emergency managers employ a wide range of warning methods, including sirens, media, text and sms-based alert systems, and online tools such as Twitter feeds."

Brady Delander can be reached at bdelander@metronorthnews.com