

Contra Costa County supervisors want to fix its problem-plagued emergency warning system. But the man who runs it may not be on board.

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday agreed with a majority of the Civil Grand Jury's findings

Katie Lauer

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In August of 2012, TV news crews and the curious gather on a hillside in Point Richmond to photograph the fire in an oil unit at the Chevron refinery in Richmond. (D. Ross Cameron/Staff Archives)

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MARTINEZ — Chronic issues with Contra Costa County's Community Warning System (CWS) have sparked fears for years that alerts about wildfires, refinery incidents, earthquakes and other dangers will fail to keep residents safe.

While county leaders addressed some of those problems this week, what they didn't acknowledge is that one elected official holds ultimate authority over that system's operations — meaning any proposed fixes may fail to make any traction.

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday agreed with a majority of the findings in an [ominous June report by the Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury](#), which found that only 30% of residents are enrolled in the CWS' current voluntary opt-in system. The county was also criticized for failing to establish alert

protocols to inform residents about less-impactful chemical releases, such as the flaring event last Thanksgiving that [showered 24 tons of toxic, dusty residue on neighbors living near the Martinez Refining Company](#).

These concerns are paramount in Contra Costa County, which [scores in the 99th percentile](#) for both overall risk and financial loss due to natural hazards.

Responding to the grand jury report, the supervisors recommended that the county conduct a comprehensive study of its emergency management and disaster response function — including its planning, communication, public outreach and training efforts.

County staff said they will explore ways to streamline internal staff notification procedures, enhance training verification for first responders and analyze the feasibility of installing new Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs). Staff said specific studies and a more expansive plan will return for board consideration before the end of 2024.

However, county officials still defended many of its current practices, including the Sheriff's Office's decision to utilize on-call CWS employees and law enforcement heads to confirm and coordinate warning messages, rather than training emergency dispatchers to send out alerts. While dispatchers are authorized to handle alerts related to refineries and chemical plants, Contra Costa County is the only Bay Area county that [does not train those same workers to operate the CWS during emergencies](#), according to a 2018 survey.

Julie Beach-Cavallero, the Community Warning System's manager, and Tim Ewell, chief assistant county administrator, argued that there already are several redundancies in place to reach as many people as possible during a disaster, including "reverse 911" alert protocols, hazardous material sirens, social media posts, campaigns to enroll more residents within the existing CWS and contracts to access contact info from utility and telecom provider data.

Supervisor John Gioia said that the civil grand jury's report and subsequent deadlines to implement a host of recommendations are "the best avenues we have" to study and expand the county's CWS and other alert systems, particularly involving new ways to better protect low-income communities that may have limited access to cell phones and other emergency resources.

"My concern always is that every impacted resident needs to be notified of anything that causes an impact to their health or requires them to take action," Gioia said in an interview Wednesday, referring to less critical incidents that lack mandated alerts, including refinery flaring. "I've seen the CWS in operation for a long time, and there's been gaps."

However, there's still a chance that this direction from county staff may not have much sway.

In Contra Costa County, the CWS is ultimately controlled by [Sheriff David Livingston](#), who is serving his fourth term since first being elected in 2010. While county officials can provide input through its [Industrial Safety Ordinance/Community Warning System Ad Hoc Committee](#) and [Emergency Services Policy Board](#), decisions about operations and improvements are ultimately Livingston's call.

Richmond City Councilmember Sohelia Bana said this governing structure — without many options for public input or criticism — is one of her biggest grievances that wasn't addressed this week.

Bana, who founded the West Contra Costa Fire Safe Council in 2022, wrote a letter to the grand jury last year after fruitless attempts to contact the Sheriff's Office about potential improvements to the CWS, many of which had previously been deemed too expensive, redundant or not worth the effort.

While she is pleased that county executives largely support efforts to improve emergency preparedness, Bana said she is disappointed that the supervisors did not ask — or even require — the

Sheriff's Office to provide more detailed information on how they internally test ongoing operations, respond to community complaints and plan for future improvements.

Specifically, she called out conflicting data about two evacuation drills the city of Richmond conducted in 2022 and 2023 that she said revealed half of the participants either did not receive alerts or were notified hours after the drill was complete.

The sheriff's office, however, claims that CWS data show a 90% successful delivery rate for both drills — outright rejecting the grand jury's findings that the county failed to verify, interrogate or study Richmond's concerns.

Bana said that staff within the Sheriff's Office "mocked her request" to schedule a meeting with the county's top cop, which she hoped would help improve communication channels and ensure their current practices are up to snuff.

"It's easier to make an appointment with God than with the sheriff," Bana said in an interview Wednesday. "We are asking for transparency, but the Sheriff is not accountable, he's not responsive — his office doesn't care about public safety."

[Livingston](#) and staff within the Sheriff's Office did not respond to requests for comment.

Bana said she's hopeful that she can continue to push for changes through the county's standing ad hoc committee and policy board meetings, which provide forums about the CWS and other emergency services.

"My only hope is to push for more citizen advisory or oversight for this whole thing," Bana said. "(The Sheriff's Office doesn't) get the significance or complex dimensions of the problem. I don't think they understand the weight of this."

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RESOLUTION 2024-08

RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE KENSINGTON FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT SUPPORTING FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE REPORT OF 2023-2024 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY: THE CCC COMMUNITY WARNING SYSTEM

WHEREAS, the Kensington Fire Protection District is a special district organized under the laws of the State of California and includes within its jurisdiction all properties in the unincorporated portion of the community of Kensington; and

WHEREAS, the Kensington Fire Protection District's mission is to provide the highest level of service to Kensington in order to protect the lives, property, and environment of the community from the disastrous effects of fires, medical emergencies, natural disasters, and other hazardous conditions; and

WHEREAS, the Kensington Fire Protection District's Emergency Preparedness Committee reviewed and recommends supporting key findings and recommendations of *The Report Of 2023-2024 Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury: The CCC Community Warning System*.

Findings

- F11. Outdoor warning systems supplement other warning tools by providing acoustic (voice or siren sounds) to people who are outdoors.
- F12. Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs) can broadcast audible instructions to people outdoors when cell phones and other alert-receiving devices may not be working or heard.
- F13. A sound study is needed to evaluate where, if at all, LRADs might be effective in Contra Costa County.
- F14. Sites where LRADs could be located would need to be identified for any areas in which LRADs are found to be effective.
- F15. The County would incur a cost for a sound study on the feasibility to deploy LRADs within the County.
- F16. There is no estimate of the cost for an independent, third party to conduct a feasibility study for the use of LRADs within the County.

Recommendations

- R3. By December 31, 2024, the Board of Supervisors should commission a sound study by an independent, third party to determine the feasibility of deploying LRADs in any areas of the County.
- R4. By June 30, 2025, the Office of the Sheriff should train employees in the Sheriff's dispatch center to operate the CWS.
- R5. By March 31, 2025, the Office of the Sheriff should implement a plan to conduct testing of the CWS to determine the causes of the failure of CWS alerts to reach all the intended recipients of test alerts within 10 – 20 minutes of the time the alert is sent.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Directors hereby supports the aforementioned findings and recommendations of The Report Of 2023-2024 Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury: The CCC Community Warning System.

The foregoing resolution was duly adopted at a regular meeting of the Kensington Fire Protection District on the 21st day of August 2024 by the following vote of the Board.

AYES:
NOES:
ABSENT:
ABSTAIN:

Daniel Levine, President

Rick Artis, Secretary