

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

EDITORIAL: Warning System Fails

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WE CAN HARDLY BLAME Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt for being angry that, once again, the county's supposed early warning system has failed to respond as expected in Monday's fire at the Chevron refinery.

The system, which is supposed to call local residents in affected areas during an emergency and instruct them what they should do, was late in calling.

While calls were eventually made to residents in nearby Point Richmond and other places, they came more than a hour after the fire broke out.

The community was lucky because valiant firefighters from both Chevron and Richmond brought the blaze -- which had flames as high as 100 feet -- under control.

There was one injury at the plant, but this could have been much, much worse.

Although the blaze began at 5:15 a.m. Monday, Butt -- who lives in Point Richmond -- did not get his call until 6:38 a.m. Butt thinks that is far too late. It is hard to argue with him. More than an hour's delay in notification could have been the difference between survival and disaster.

Butt is seething about the errors and adds, "This community warning system has been a joke from the beginning."

Again, it is difficult to argue with the councilman. The county's system had never really worked properly for any length of time since being installed in the early '90s. Frankly, it has been a boondoggle from its inception.

This time, it appears the Tennessee software vendor that administers the system had glitches in executing the calls.

However, there is at least some good news in all of this.

First, the fire, while dramatic, did not reach its damage potential because of the firefighters.

Second, Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia is very much on this case. While we have sometimes had differences with Gioia on policy matters, we have long admired his tenacity, energy and ability

to ask tough questions. We are confident he will get to the bottom of the problem and will report about it fully to the public.

That is what is needed here. For the community to have any confidence in this system whatsoever, someone must take this bull by the horns and insist this system works properly every time. Gioia is just the person to handle such a job.

We look forward to the results of his investigation and to the steps that the supervisors plan to take to ensure that the residents of this county have the best and most efficient warning possible.