



December 6, 2023

Honorable Common Council Members, Mayor Handeland, and City Manager Steckman:

RE: Current gaps in providing effective and meaningful notifications and plans for public response to emergencies in Nome.

The Nome Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC)¹ plans and exercises for all hazard emergencies such as HAZMAT spills, fires, aircraft accidents, medical surge, earthquakes, tsunami, and sea storms that have historically impacted Nome residents. In late 2020 and early 2021 the LEPC prepared and presented an updated Emergency Operation Plan (EOP) for the City of Nome to Mr. Steckman. This was an update from the 2011 Plan, but it has not been ratified and implemented by the City Council.

The Nome LEPC, Preparedness Sub Committee (LEPC-PC) met November 20th, 2023 to discuss the current lack of public emergency warning communications, and plans for educating the public on the EOP processes. In attendance was Mr. Ryan Metzger (Warning Coordination Meteorologist) from the National Weather Service in Fairbanks. We discussed historical emergency events in Nome and the region as well as and the potential for future events. Additionally, we discussed the current systems and processes to warn, educate, plan, and execute effective responses for all emergencies that may happen in Nome. The focal point of our discussion was the current issue of no emergency sirens or other all-of-City wide emergency notification system available for the public. Even if the City could quickly notify all the citizens, the citizens have not been educated on plans nor specific routes for evacuation to designated shelters².

Further, the LEPC-PC discussed as well the failing 911 phone system and Emergency Services Radio System which the Council and Administration continue (for several years) to have no expressed plan to repair those two systems.

Background

Recently Nome has experienced “close calls” for potential widespread casualties/destruction where the emergency sirens would have notified residents of a larger disaster and prompted them to act to remove themselves/children/elderly etc. from harm. These include but are not limited to:

1. Earthquake (Magnitude 6.4) in the southern Bering Sea (October 2023): This was a very concerning event for the Nome LEPC because the quake was not only large but was located *north* of the Aleutian Island, potentially exposing the Bering Strait region to a Tsunami. Since

the mass majority of quakes occur south of the Aleutian chain, the threat is typically extended to the south and not north towards the Seward Peninsula. Therefore, there is very little Tsunami warning instrumentation located in the southern Bering Sea. During the October event it took three hours for the NWS Tsunami Warning Center to notify our region (the LEPC Chair) of any potential Tsunami. Current tsunami models predict that a Tsunami generated from a similar earthquake in the southern Bering Sea, the tsunami would have arrived within two hours. Lastly, historical information indicates a 20ft tsunami wave could easily arrive to Nome's shores.

2. Landfall of Typhoon Merbok and the concurrent Bering Sea Restaurant and Bar fire (September 2022): While the siren systems were functional at the time of Merbok's arrival and the fire these two combined events is a perfect view into the emergency events in Nome's long history. As you know the City has burnt almost in its entirety to the ground a number of times. The potential of burning Nome down again was a real threat while NVFD was fighting the Bering Sea fire. We have also endured what have been labeled as "100-year events" on a 3-5 year cycle and sometimes back to back years. Merbok is reported to have had an 11ft storm surge in Nome. Recall, a Tsunami could have a 20ft wave surge.

3. The Airport Table Top Exercise TTX (May 2023): While not an actually physical event, but a TTX with local State and City emergency managers, responders, and tenants at the Nome Airport. This group also discussed how would the City, and emergency managers quickly notify the public of an emergency without operational sirens, and an uneducated public on the appropriate actions to take in the event of an emergency.

Recommendations/Solutions

During our meeting, the LEPC-PC was unable to determine the current issue for the siren system failure. It is well known the main unit was damaged during the fire at the Public Works Building on March 13, 2023. Some LEPC members noted the City is working to fix the system, and another member noted they were advised in a separate City meeting the current system is so antiquated that repair parts are no longer available. It was also noted the siren system is directly reliant on the failing EMS radio system.

1. Funding must be immediately sought (preferably grant funding) to obtain functional mass emergency public notification sirens. Hurricane, major storms, and tsunami events occur statewide/worldwide and communities use, maintain, and replace siren warning systems as a normal business. Finding a replacement mass emergency notification system should be a priority. Grants and federal Funding are readily available currently for early warning systems.

2. Funding must be immediately sought (again we recommend grants) to obtain a new EMS radio system. The City has had more than one contractor provide a review and recommendations for the replacement of the system over the past few years (LEPC-PC was not sure if an official RFP process has been started). The City has received two \$500,000.00 grants to replace the radio system and not been able to follow through. These efforts include FEMA

grant funds (2018) received which were subsequently turned down by the City Administration, as well as another FEMA grant (2020) which FEMA pulled as the COVID pandemic was prioritized higher.

3. Finalize the DRAFT Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) which was presented to the City Manager in 2021. In addition to two Annex's the LEPC did not have the expertise to write at the time, we recommend an additional Annex which includes mass evacuation planning, notification procedures, marked travel/evacuation routes, supplied shelters that are well defined, and frequent/relevant public outreach on emergency notification, procedures, and actions.

4. The LEPC has long supported the City employing an Emergency Services Director, who would keep emergency/disaster notifications and communications up to date and operational, as well as support the Fire, Ambulance, and Police Departments.

Conclusion:

The LEPC is a planning body created by the Federal Government, and has oversight by both the Federal and State governments in Nome since the early 2000's. There are some failed and deteriorating emergency communication systems in Nome, as well as the lack of evacuation infrastructure and public education and preparedness. The City of Nome responds to all emergencies in super hero fashion as each emergency unfolds. The LEPC-PC respectfully request the Common Council consider the immediate needs and concerns as listed above, along with the solutions presented.

1: Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC's) were identified and empowered under Title III of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986 (SARA) as codified and regulated by the US Environmental Protection Agency under 40 CFR Parts 355 and 370. LEPC's are also regulated by the State of Alaska Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

2: The LEPC Tribal Representative has stated all four Nome-based tribal governments (i.e. Native Village of Solomon, Nome Eskimo Community, King Island Traditional Council, and Native Village of Council) representing 60% of Nome's residents, are gravely concerned the City of Nome has no evacuation routes marked for the public.

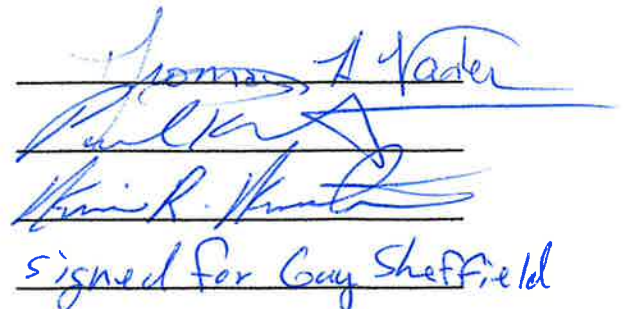
LEPC Preparedness Subcommittee:

Thomas Vaden, LEPC Chair

LT. Paul G. Kosto, LEPC Vice Chair

Kevin Knowlton, Tribal Representative

Gay Sheffield, UAF Northwest Campus Representative



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Signed for Gay Sheffield