

Questions raised about use of tornado sirens

Written by Kyle Arnoldy

Sirens are a very prominent component of life in Holyoke. They sound a minimum of three times on any given weekday and more in emergencies. But during the recent storm that overtook the town, many wondered why no siren was sounded to warn citizens of the tornado threat.

To understand why sirens weren't whistled the evening of Monday, April 8, it is important to understand the protocol involved.

The communications center is responsible for sounding the tornado siren, which blows for three consecutive minutes. Once the center receives a report of a tornado in the area, whether from the National Weather Service through Sterling or from a citizen, a trained tornado spotter is then sent out to determine the validity of the claim. Once verified by a spotter, the alarm is sounded when the tornado is within 10 miles of Holyoke.

Upwards of 50 people in Phillips County, including first responders, have taken the training class put on by the National Weather Service to become certified spotters.

The communications center was actually in touch with the National Weather Service the night of the Holyoke storm, but their radar did not indicate the presence of a tornado. Holyoke had been placed under a tornado warning, but spotters were unable to locate a tornado in the area, so the tornado sirens were never put to use.

Kenny Gaskill, communications center director, noted the difficulty in spotting a tornado at night because the only source of light is the lightning that generally accompanies the twister.

Members of Holyoke City Council also addressed issues with the tornado siren at the April 16 meeting, discussing the catch-22 scenario that sounding the tornado siren presents.

If sounded every time a warning is issued instead of when a tornado is within 10 miles, citizens may begin to ignore the sirens as they become more common. During the April 8 storm, Holyoke was put under a tornado warning on two separate occasions during the night.

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Unnecessarily sounding the alarm can present a new series of issues in the community. Those at the hospital and at Regent Park are moved to hallways when the alarm is sounded. If multiple tornadoes are in the area, it may be several hours before an all-clear siren is sounded, even if the tornadoes never come within 10 miles of town.

City Superintendent Mark Brown notified members that even if a tornado was spotted and it was determined that a siren was necessary April 8, a main line fuse had gone down in the storm. Two of the five sirens, located on the golf course and at the intersection at Gordon Street and Evans Avenue, would not have worked.

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