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# *V. St. Clair County Capacity to Address Hazards*

## *County Government*

St. Clair County is governed by the Commission/Appointed Administrator form of government. This form is characterized by an official who has a significant degree of authority over most aspects of county administration. The county administrator is appointed by the Board of Commissioners (BOC), which is the legislative and policy-making body of the county. The BOC consists of seven members elected at-large for two-year terms. The BOC and Administrator provide community leadership, develop policies to guide the county in delivering services and achieving community goals, and encourage citizen awareness and involvement.

In addition to the Commission/Appointed Administrator structure, the county government is organized into the following departments ([www.stclaircounty.org](http://www.stclaircounty.org)): Administration, Airport, Animal Shelter, Buildings and Grounds, County Clerk, Courts, Drain Commissioner, Emergency Management, Environmental Services, Equalization, Friend of the Court, Health, Human Resources, Humane Law Enforcement, Information Technology, Juvenile Center, Library, Marine Patrol, Metropolitan Planning, MSU Extension, Parks and Recreation, Prosecuting Attorney, Public Guardian, Register of Deeds, Road Commission, Sheriff, Staff Resource Pool, Treasurer, and Veterans' Affairs. Many of these departments play a pivotal role in planning for safety and preparing for emergencies. In regards to planning for and responding to hazard events, the key rudiments of the county's organization are:

- **Administration:** This department is responsible for preparation of budgets, reports, resolutions and communications for the Board of Commissioners, as well as serving as a liaison between County Departments and the Board of Commissioners. The Administrator/Controller's Office has the task of developing systems and programs that will enable the County to provide more effective and efficient services to our citizens.
- **Office of Emergency Management:** OEM's primary responsibility is to provide for the safety of county residents and visitors within St. Clair County, along with our neighboring communities. This is accomplished through a multi-hazard planning process that involves mitigation, preparation, response and recovery, combined with a strong working relationship with all levels of government and the private sector. OEM committed to provide a quality service to those people with a continuous goal of improving those services.

"No matter what we do in life, communication is key. Good communication can increase productivity, boost morale and reduce conflict. It can also save lives. But communication means more than just words and speech. It can pertain to technology such as e-mail and alarms, or it might mean color-coded terrorism alerts."

-- Captain John Ort,  
Deputy State Director of  
Homeland Security and  
Emergency Management.

- **Sheriff's Department:** In addition to maintaining the Jail and the care of the inmates, the Sheriff also provides police services to those unincorporated areas of the County, provides contractual police services to five townships, operates a Drug Task Force enforcement division, operates a Marine Patrol, and handles over 40,000 calls for police service each year.
- **Health Department:** The St. Clair County Health Department picks up "indications" about disease and health risks in the general population, and gives advice, education, and warnings to the community on how to prevent indicated diseases and health risks.
- **Road Commission:** The Road Commission strives to effectively and efficiently meet the transportation needs of the people to move families and goods through the county.
- **Metropolitan Planning Commission:** The MPC is composed of 11 members appointed by the Board of Commissioners and is staffed by professional planners and geographic information systems analysts. The MPC works to improve the quality of life for residents and visitors through comprehensive community wide planning programs that establish policies and plans to guide economic, physical, and social development. It also coordinates with local unit of government to ensure smart land use, transportation, environmental, economic, and safety planning. Among other things, the MPC
  - Provides planning and zoning assistance to local communities through review and recommendations on local land use plans and zoning ordinances;
  - Conducts research on planning and zoning matters on behalf of local communities, provides sample ordinances, and collects and disseminates data; and
  - Provides data and conducts limited research for citizens and the public at large. The Commission can also provide aerial photography, wetland maps, topographical maps and soils surveys.

The primary responsibility of OEM is to provide for the safety of our residences and visitors within St. Clair County along with our neighboring communities. This is accomplished through a multi-hazard planning process that involves mitigation, preparation, response and recovery combined with a strong working relationship with all levels of government and the private sector.

## *Office of Emergency Management*

After the events of September 11th, the OEM is now the coordination point for Homeland Security within the county. A task force has been established to support the functions of the office. The Emergency Management Program of St. Clair County is a valued and integral part of the communities and municipalities it serves and supports. OEM continually seeks meaningful ways to address unmet or under-met needs of its partners and constituency groups. OEM is staffed with three full-time positions.

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Under the leadership of the BOC and the Administrator, the Emergency Management Department focuses on the coordination and facilitation of community-wide responses to a wide variety of emergency situations. OEM places a large emphasis upon community education, building cooperative relationships between and among the emergency management network, addressing issues of Homeland Security, and coordinating the preparation for disaster response. The importance of coordination and cooperation cannot be understated. All levels of government and many private sector companies are developing plans and strategies to appropriately plan for and respond to a wide variety of potential emergencies. County Officials and local leaders are required to act in the most prudent and efficient manner when called upon during emergency events. Coordinated events during past emergency situations have reduced the loss of life, property damage and the disruption of our daily lives.

## *St. Clair County Emergency Notification Systems*

St. Clair County has substantial existing systems that can be used to support the emergency warning process. Existing fiber optic networks between municipal organizations, radio networks, multimedia streaming capabilities, and telephone-based systems are examples of these systems.

In October 2004, the county hired Virchow, Krause and Company, LLP of Madison, Wisconsin to assess existing notification systems and issues. In the final report, entitled “Assessment of Notification Technologies for Office of Emergency Management,” the consultant identified several possible directions toward approaches to warn county residents when emergencies occur and what steps should be taken toward safety. The report also presents the needs of the warning process and the target communities that have unique notification needs. A copy of the report can be found in the Appendix of this Hazard Mitigation Plan.

Typical situations that would result in the need to issue an emergency warning to citizens and organizations within the county include homeland security related incidents, weather related warnings, environmental incidents, chemical spills into the St. Clair River, and situation-based lower priority incidents such as road closures.

There are a number of diverse segments of the community that need to receive emergency notifications. Most target segments have unique characteristics that may require a specific notification technique or multiple notification techniques. Target communities for emergency notification include

The population-at-large presents a significant notification challenge for emergency management. People must be made aware of an emergency in a manner that immediately grabs their attention. For this reason, multiple notification technologies may be needed in order to successfully inform the public..

Motorists on the highways can be notified through road related communications, such as electronic signs placed along the roadway that provide emergency information and subsequent directions for travelers. Mobile travelers can also be reached via the radios inside their vehicles.

- **Schools:** Schools are a highly structured environment with a management group that is capable of receiving warnings and related instructions and acting in a swift, coordinated manner.
- **Hospitals and assisted living centers:** Hospitals and assisted living centers also have a highly structured environment capable of swift coordination. However, these types of facilities often have sensitive populations that are not easily moved in a rapid manner due to physical impairment or sickness.
- **Campground and recreation areas:** Most recreational areas depend on public broadcast systems to receive notification of an emergency situation.
- **Island areas:** St. Clair County has numerous islands in the delta area of the St. Clair River, such as Harsens Island and Dickinson Island. For these locations, an emergency notification should be customized to each individual user. Island residents should provide a preference for a contact methodology.
- **Mobile travelers:** Motorists on the highways can be notified through road related communications, such as electronic signs placed along the roadway that provide emergency information and subsequent directions for travelers. Mobile travelers can also be reached via the radios inside their vehicles.
- **Business and retail outlets:** Business organizations can quickly move staff to safety once an emergency notification has been received.
- **Governmental agencies:** Government agencies require prompt notification of emergency situations, followed by the recommended steps to be taken to assist the public to safety. Support systems and other social agencies require the same attention.
- **General public:** The population-at-large presents a significant notification challenge for emergency management. People must be made aware of an emergency in a manner that immediately grabs their attention. For this reason, multiple notification technologies may be needed in order to successfully inform the public.

## *Inventory of Existing Notification Technologies*

The county continues to develop a multifaceted platform for emergency notification that reaches people and organizations in a manner that best meets their needs. No one notification approach can be optimized to reach all citizens. Table 5-1 provides an overview of existing notification resources within the county.

Table 5-1: Existing Notification Technologies Matrix, St. Clair County

Existing Resource	Voice	Video	Data	Informational
Amateur Radio	Yes	No	No	No
Cable Television	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cable Television PEG Channels	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Classco Device	Yes	No	Yes	No
Mobile Public Address Equipment	Yes	No	No	Yes
Municipal Fiber Optic Network	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Select Alert	Yes	No	No	No
Siren System	No	No	Yes	No
Streaming Video	No	Yes	No	Yes
VHF Radios Fire Department	Yes	No	No	No
Website	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Wireless Data Network	No	No	No	No

Source: "Assessment of Notification Technologies for Office of Emergency Management," Virchow, Krause and Company, LLP., 2004

- **Amateur Radio:** Founded in 1952, the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES) is a public service that provides a reserve communications group within government agencies in times of extraordinary need. During periods of activation, RACES personnel are called upon to perform many tasks for the government agencies they serve. Although the exact nature of each activation will be different, the common thread is communications.
- **Cable Television:** Comcast Cable has an emergency broadcast system (EBS) that can interrupt programming during an emergency event in all of the urban areas of St. Clair County and portions of Macomb County. The EBS systems are not part of a larger emergency notification system. In some of the rural areas in the northern half of the county, cable television is not available.
- **Cable Television Public Education and Government (PEG) Channels:** Local cable companies provide PEG channels that can be used to provide emergency notifications to citizens in the communities that are served by each cable company. At present, the individual channels in each community are not linked.
- **Classco Device:** This device allows specific notification information to be sent over telephone lines to citizens and is being



St. Clair County has engaged the special needs community by actively encouraging persons with disabilities who are not living within a care facility to register for SelectAlert. The SelectAlert system will automatically contact them in the case of an emergency and provide instructions for how to handle the situation.

used by the City of Sarnia, Ontario across the St. Clair River.

- **Mobile Public Address System:** Police and fire vehicles have the capability of making announcements while driving through the streets. This notification method can take a lot of time to be effective.
- **Municipal Fiber Optic Network:** The county, local governments, and school districts have fiber optic networks that are all linked with county facilities. The networks are linked to allow for notification programming to be distributed if it is based upon the Internet Protocol (IP).
- **Select Alert:** St. Clair County Select Alert is an innovative solution for improving communications between government agencies, volunteer organizations, businesses, and the citizens of St. Clair County. Select Alert is a notification system that sends coordinated information to multiple communication devices simultaneously. Currently Select Alert can deliver information to telephones, cell phones, e-mails, pagers, and fax machines. It also includes those for the hearing impaired as described in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The benefits and the efficiencies of a system like Select Alert are tremendous. In the event of an emergency, St. Clair County not only has the ability to send rapid emergency notification to affected areas. The system also allows the sharing of information with the media, volunteer organizations and other government agencies in a timely manner. Benefits of Select Alert include:

- Announcing emergencies or routine information with ease.
- Notifying customers of service interruptions.
- Issuing Amber Alert information.
- Serving Special Needs populations.

Select Alert gives the citizens of St. Clair County the ability to opt in/opt-out capabilities. Citizens choose the method to receive information based on their personal preferences. By signing up on the St. Clair County website a citizen will create a customize profile choosing what they would like to be notified about such as water systems information, community crime information, road closures, emergency information, and other service related information and how they would be notified. At any time a citizen chooses remove themselves from the system they simply return to the website and remove their name.

- **Siren System:** The county has a county-wide siren system to provide emergency warnings. Most of the warning sirens do

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not support voice announcements, which means that sirens cannot provide the nature of the emergency or describe steps for residents to take in the event of a hazard event.

- **Streaming Video:** The county Information Technology department has the ability to stream live video messages over an IP-based network. This versatile notification technology allows training and emergency information to be distributed via web pages and or as streaming, on-demand or scheduled video on television.
- **VHF Radio:** The VHF Radio system is the most common, radio-based communication system used by fire services within the county. It is based on the VHF radios utilized as part of the County Fire Broadcast System and simply allows for voice communications between fire service agencies.
- **Website:** The county has an extensive web site that can provide residents with information and notifications. It is also looking into different approaches to obtain contact information to be used in a database that would allow citizens to be contacted in a hazard event.
- **Wireless Data Networks:** The county has an 802.11- based wireless network in some areas of the county.

## *Other Warning Systems Used in the County*

In addition to the notification technologies discussed above, the county has a variety of other notification systems, such as:

- **Emergency Advisory Radio System (EARS):** The Office of Emergency Management will soon be operating the Emergency Advisory Radio System (EARS). EARS is an emergency radio station to specifically tell area motorists and residents what to do during AMBER alerts, flash floods, industrial accidents, terror threats, tornados, hazardous material incidents, and other types of emergencies. Through the EARS station listeners can receive up-to-the minute reports, alerts, and instructions with the level of timeliness and detail that make these types of broadcast invaluable, especially when disaster strikes. During non-emergency times communities can use the EARS station to inform motorists of street repairs, public notices, upcoming events, city history or visitor information.
- **Skywarn:** The National Weather Service (NWS) utilizes trained personnel in the field to provide timely and accurate reports of storm activity from various locations that can supplement the NWS radar network. In the county's SKYWARN program, there are over 50 trained weather spotters available



to report weather conditions to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). These individuals come from many walks of life, some utilizing amateur radios while other will utilize cell phones as their reporting methods. Many of the spotters are equipped with pagers to insure prompt notification of weather warnings. In addition to the SKYWARN spotter system, many of the local fire departments place apparatus in key locations to assist in providing weather information.

With the SKYWARN concept, our residents have the potential to receive earlier notification of life threatening weather situations. Obviously any delay in reporting and notification poses the threat of injury and even death. The NWS has provided both basic and advanced training to many members of the program. Additional internal training along with some specialized FEMA training is available to the members who meet on a monthly basis.

- **StormReady:** St. Clair County is certified by the National Weather Service as a StormReady Community. StormReady is a program aimed at arming America's Communities with the communication and safety skills necessary to save lives and property. StormReady prepares communities with an action plan that responds to the threat of all types of severe weather.

The Local National Weather Service forecast office worked with OEM to complete the application and review process. To be officially StormReady, St. Clair County had to:

- Establish a 24-hour warning point and emergency operations center;
- Have more than one way to receive severe weather forecast and warnings to alert the public;
- Create a system that monitors local weather conditions;
- Promote the importance of public readiness through community seminars; and
- Develop a formal hazardous weather plan, which includes training severe weather spotters and holding emergency exercises.

On September 25, 2002, the National Weather Service certified St. Clair County as a StormReady Community and issued road signs for posting in the county. The certification is good for three years.

- **Spill-Warning System:** At the end of 2005, St. Clair County, along with Macomb County, will have new equipment that will alert water plants of river chemical leaks. The new chemical-detection system will warn emergency personnel when spills



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occur and what populations are at risk. Most of the equipment will be installed in either Marysville or St. Clair.

In the “*Assessment of Notification Technologies for Office of Emergency Management*,” the consultant recommended that OEM consider the following next steps to enhance its notification technologies:

1. Perform a survey of local resources, such as cable, telephone, television, and power companies that have the capacity to transport an emergency message.
2. Consider a wireless network throughout the county that builds upon the existing fiber optic network resources currently used by all levels of municipal government.
3. Use satellite communications as an auxiliary conduit for emergency information between county agencies and state or national agencies and organizations outside the emergency area that would be located in the county.
4. Consider updating the existing Plectron based radio system.
5. Encourage the Information Technology department to consider streaming multimedia training information to appropriate agencies.
6. Consider a combination of high-tech and low-tech approaches to the overall warning system.

## *Emergency Communications Systems*

In any emergency situation, it is vital that first responders and other emergency personnel have the ability to easily communicate with one another. In most hazard events, responders from a variety of agencies are called into action to assess the situation and begin a unified response. Emergencies breed coordination. With the current communications system in the county, police officers, firefighters, and emergency responders have to use several radios as they enter different municipalities and often are unable to directly communicate with each other. Some areas of the county even have “dead spots” which prevent various departments from communicating with each other. These types of system incompatibilities makes coordination – an essential function in emergency management – difficult to sustain.

The county is cognizant of the inadequacies that exist within its emergency communications system. A centralized radio communication system would allow first responders county-wide to communicate with each other. In order to achieve this desired level of efficiency, the county will need to invest in 800-megahertz communications towers that will allow them to connect to the state of Michigan’s emergency communications system. Having a central dispatch unit utilizing the 800-megahertz technology on a single radio network will bridge communication gaps

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and allow for direct communication among first responders, regardless of municipal boundaries. A central dispatch unit will also lead to more efficient and better trained dispatchers handling fire and EMS calls.

## *Public Safety Software*

In 2004, the county purchased *VisionCAD* computer-aided dispatch; *VisionRMS* law enforcement records management system; and *VisionMOBILE* mobile data system from *VisionAIR*'s Public Safety Suite. In addition the county purchased *VisionINFORM*, a browser-based portal, part of the *VisionCONNECT* integration platform. The sheriff's office full-time 911 dispatchers use *VisionCAD* to dispatch for seven police departments along with the sheriff's office, seventeen fire departments, and four ambulance services in St. Clair County.

*VisionCAD* displays vital dispatching data at a glance simultaneously showing current call detail and the status of all police, fire, and EMS units. The software helps to assign a priority to each emergency call so dispatchers always see the most urgent calls first.

*VisionRMS* enables the St. Clair County Sheriff's Office to efficiently manage essential records and to report incidents and arrests directly to the FBI or state crime information centers.

*VisionMOBILE* keeps the sheriff's office personnel in the field connected with access to *VisionCAD* dispatch information via laptop computers. Over a wireless network, through a powerful message switch, deputies can obtain call information; update incident records and unit status; and run searches against *VisionRMS* and state and federal data stores.



