

Fire chief to tone down central city sirens

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who chaired the meeting, said her order, once effective, was “lax now.”

“We’re asking the chief to communicate with her station (No. 3),” he said at the beginning. “That’s pretty much it.”

The chief sympathized with the complainers but said the department is bound by its mission to get to fires as quickly as possible to save life and property. The department needs loud warnings.

“We want to make sure we announce ourselves,” Hayes-White said. “It can be challenging to get things out of our way at intersections.”

Reducing noisy full alarm Code 3 responses down to the quieter Code 2 responses, Deputy Chief Kochevar said, requires a 911 determination and communicating the downgrade to the department so it can immediately slow up and reduce the siren and horn noise.

“Ours have about 123 decibels,” he said. “The sound bounces off the buildings, though.”

An ambulance siren at 10 feet is 120 decibels and 15 seconds of exposure over eight hours can cause permanent hearing loss, according to the University of Michigan Health System Web site. (See sidebar.)

In the future, the officials indicated, it may be possible to synchronize stop lights to automatically change to favor the path of response vehicles. In February, Hayes-White sent a letter to the Polk Street Neighbors saying she was willing to analyze any Department of Parking and Traffic study for such a plan.

“It might be confusing to the public, though,” the chief told *The Extra* later. “I’ve asked the deputy chief to follow up. There may be other districts outside of the city using it.”

A white-haired man in the front row grew impatient with the explanations and reminded the meeting that the discussion was to be about air horns, sirens and levels of noise.

“And if you’re telling me the (noise) level isn’t high-pitched, you’re trying to pull a big one,” he said. “I’ve lived here 50 years, and it didn’t used to be this bad. I have to do like this now when they go by.” And he stuck his fingers in his ears.

He and a young woman sitting in the back asked if the noise was causing damage to their hearing. The woman, who has lived near Leavenworth Street for 15 years, said she wondered if her hearing loss could be due to high-frequency emergency horns, because fire trucks pass by so frequently.

The experts at the table had no response and were saved by the bell. A cell phone rang and three fire officials shot out of their seats and left for a potential high-rise fire at First and Howard streets.

A sore spot that continues to aggravate residents is the number of runs that are medical and nonfire-related, more than 70%, according to the Fire

Department estimate. The department absorbed the city’s paramedic division in 1997 and now, unless it’s designated nonemergency and medical, a 911 call gets both a fire engine and ambulance, even a false alarm, which, of course, they don’t know till they get there.

Someone suggested getting rid of call boxes, but Hayes-White was quick to say they are essential for people without cell phones.

There were 884 false alarms in Station 3’s response area in 2007, down 14% from 2006, according to department figures.

“Why not send only an ambulance?” asked TL resident Michael Pedersen, who has kept abreast of the noise issue for three years.

“People are opposed to that,” answered the chief. “If it’s a fire, an ambulance can’t stop it.”

“But it’s such a small chance,” he said.

“We could argue it,” she said. “But at the end of the day we look at what our role is. And yes, there are many false alarms from call boxes. Pull the hook and we get notified.”

Erica Byrne, a Leavenworth Street resident who works on Market Street, puzzled the department’s remaining panel by showing that under the California Vehicle Code a vehicle responding to an emergency doesn’t have to sound a siren.

“Are you aware that using the siren isn’t required?” she asked the panel, then walked up front to show them a copy of the code section that spells it out. Byrne taught vehicle laws and regulations for six years at the South Zone Fire Engine Academy.

It’s a common mistake to think that sounding a siren is required, she said. After the meeting, Byrne said she was disappointed in the department’s lack of knowledgeable responses to questions about health.

Many of the topics were discussed at length June 14, 2005, when 70 people attended an Alliance for a Better District Six forum on sirens. It was suggested then that a study be conducted to examine the effects of the sirens on people. A 19-member Siren Abatement Committee was formed.

At a subsequent Alliance meeting, a representative from Supervisor Daly’s office attended and said the supervisor was willing to listen to the predicament but needed data to work from, and then he could meet with the committee.

Study shows noise can kill

BECAUSE of the pounding that people’s ears get from wailing sirens along the emergency response route of Station 3’s fire engine — the nation’s leader with more than 7,400 trips last year — the Tenderloin is a ripe study ground for the World Health Organization.

The WHO, which released startling new evidence last year on the effects of noise pollution, looks for households with abnormally high exposure to noise. Then it compares their death and disease rates to rates in quiet neighborhoods.

Last year’s study, prompted by a swell of complaints, suggested that the long-term exposure to mere traffic noise could account for 3% of deaths from heart attack in Europe. Worldwide, 7 million die annually of heart disease. So, 210,000 were “dying for some quiet,” according to an article on the study in *New Scientist* magazine in August. And European cities don’t use the high-powered sirens that San Francisco does.

“Until now,” the article says, quoting a London audiology professor who worked on the study, “noise has been the Cinderella form of pollution and people haven’t been aware that it has an impact on their health.”

Also quoted was EPA spokesman John Millet.

“We’ve always acknowledged that noise can exacerbate serious health problems over and beyond damage to hearing,” Millet said. It “causes a wider array of health issues including cardiovascular impacts, blood pressure, even heart attacks to those who were susceptible.”

But the agency’s Office of Noise and Abatement and Control was discontinued in the early ’80s to hand off the problem to local governments. ■

—TOM CARTER

Big noise can mean hairy hearing losses

AN engine siren at 123 decibels hurts most people’s ears and can cause hearing loss. Noise levels at concerts where volume often exceeds 120 decibels can damage your ears in 10 seconds, according to the University of Michigan Health System Web site. “Gunshots, at 160 decibels or more, literally tear the inner ear,” it says.

A person is born with 30,000 very fragile hair cells in the inner ear which change sound waves into nerve impulses that go to the brain. Once destroyed, the hairs can’t be replaced. Loud and sudden noise destroys them — like a hurricane knocking down a tree — and so does chronic noise.

“As noise exposure is repeated,” the Noise and Hearing Loss article says, “more cells are damaged and the hearing loss becomes permanent. The loss may go unnoticed for a while because it causes very few obvious symptoms. The first ... is the loss of the ability to hear higher-pitched sounds, such as birds singing. Sounds may become distorted or muffled and it may be hard for you to understand speech.”

The article advises that if you are in a noisy room and can’t be heard by a person an arm’s length away, leave the room to save your ears. And in trying times, ear plugs are the best protection against hearing loss. ■

—TOM CARTER

Police room to reopen after asbestos problem

THE Tenderloin Police Station Community Room, closed since November because of floor damage, is expected to be available for meetings by April 29 when the captain’s forum on food safety is scheduled, Capt. Gary Jimenez announced in March.

The protracted problem originated with a roof leak that dripped onto the floor. Upon inspection it was found that the flat roof wasn’t to blame; it was a clogged drainpipe that soon got fixed. Meantime, a crack in what the captain called the cheap concrete floor below had been fed by the leak and the floor swelled and buckled.

Nothing was done about it for weeks because of budget shortages, the department was told. Then Chief Heather Fong talked to Mayor Newsom, who made \$29,000 available, Jimenez said.

Workers came to fix the floor but

discovered asbestos underneath.

“The guys walked off the job,” Jimenez said. “We’re at the mercy of a bunch of contractors.”

The captain assigned Officer Leo Kiang to monitor the situation. Kiang said he called everyone involved with the project twice a day at the Department of Building Inspection and the Department of Public Works. In February he said there was “no end in sight.”

Finally, a concrete contractor was given the job to “encapsulate” the asbestos, which meant putting down another floor but using a higher grade of concrete. He missed his scheduled date but days later completed the job.

“We now await the tile contractor to arrive and lay a new floor,” Jimenez said at his March 25 meeting held at 111 Jones St. “We hope it’ll be ready for the April meeting.” ■

—TOM CARTER