

The Des Plaines Fire Department *Division of Fire Prevention* has developed a list of frequently asked questions to help clarify issues for our Wireless Alarm Ordinance.



What's New!

The Fire Alarm Monitoring System

The Des Plaines Fire Department developed a list of frequently asked questions to help clarify issues for our alarms users.

The City of Des Plaines in conjunction with the North Suburban Emergency Communications Center(911), and Fox Valley Fire and Safety have implemented a new fire alarm monitoring system for the City. This new system replaces the outdated monitoring equipment that was installed and maintained by ADT with new state of the art monitoring equipment that has been installed and is maintained by Fox Valley. A major benefit of the new equipment is that it enables alarm signals to be sent via radio instead of phone lines. This feature eliminates the problems caused by outdated phone company equipment. Along with the change in monitoring systems, the City has enacted an ordinance mandating all required fire alarm systems to be monitored by the City's 911 emergency telephone service provider, the North Suburban Emergency Communications Center.

These changes have lead to some confusion among alarm users. The Des Plaines Fire Prevention Division has developed a list of frequently asked questions in order to clear up some of this confusion.

Why did the City decide to update the monitoring equipment?

The current equipment has been in service for well over thirty years and there was considerable doubt about how much longer it would last. This system was also installed before computers were in widespread use, and now there are many technology enhancements, which expedite the alarm monitoring process to speed the dispatching of emergency equipment in the event of an emergency.

Why did the City choose to use radios instead of phone lines?

The phone lines that carried signals between the alarm users and the City were dedicated phone lines that transmitted voltages and not voice or data. This is very old technology that is not well supported by modern phone companies. Very few phone company technicians have the training to work on these lines. These lines were also very susceptible to induced voltages-such as during a thunderstorm-and moisture problems. Many alarm users spent weeks trying to resolve phone issues with their systems.

Why is Fox Valley supplying the equipment?

When the City made the decision to change equipment and convert to the new radio technology, they sent out requests for proposals to the eight local vendors who deal with this type of equipment. Fox Valley submitted the winning proposal.

What is the North Suburban Emergency Communications Center?

The NSECC is the 911 emergency telephone service provider for the City. The NSECC provides fire and police dispatching for the City of Des Plaines and the City of Park Ridge. They also provide police dispatching for the Village of Niles and the Village of Morton Grove. They are located in Des Plaines' city hall. When you call 911, you are speaking with a dispatcher from the NSECC.

My fire alarm system was connected to the 911 Center. What do I need to do?

You should have received a contract from Fox Valley for monitoring services. Simply fill out the contract and return it to Fox Valley. If you have not received any information, please contact the Des Plaines Fire Prevention Division at 847-391-5340.

Why am I paying a monitoring fee to Fox Valley if the 911 dispatchers are actually monitoring the alarm?

Fox Valley supplies and maintains the equipment that enables the personnel at the 911 center to monitor your alarms. Part of the monitoring fee is to compensate Fox Valley for the use of their equipment. Part of the monitoring fee is rebated to the city.

If I pay a fee to Fox Valley, can I stop paying fees to my current alarm company?

Not entirely. You are required to maintain your alarm systems and have a service contract with a licensed fire alarm contractor. Fire alarm systems must be regularly inspected, tested and maintained. Your current alarm company provides these services. While another division of Fox Valley provides these services as well, you are not required to use them for the regular inspection, testing, and maintenance of your alarm. You may continue to use your current alarm company. However, if part of the fee you paid your alarm company included monitoring, you may want to speak with them about adjusting your bill.

Why did my previous alarm company charge me for monitoring if my system was connected to the City?

As a customer service, many alarm companies take care of all aspects of the fire alarm. The alarm company takes care of paying the monitoring fees as part of the overall maintenance fee. If you prefer, you can have your fire alarm company take care of paying the monitoring fee to Fox Valley. This way, you only have to deal with one company and one bill.

I have a fire alarm system and I am currently monitored by the City. Do I need to install a radio?

Yes. The only exception will be if, for technical reasons, a radio will not work in your location.

My alarm system is currently monitored by the City. What is the charge for installing the radio?

For a limited time, current subscribers on the City's alarm board can have the radio installed for free.

Can I purchase a radio from another vendor?

No. The radios located throughout the City operate as a network. Each radio relies on the radios around it to transmit signals. As radios are added or removed from the network, the system must be rebalanced to provide optimal performance. Each radio must be carefully monitored and sometimes adjusted to keep the network running efficiently. A system runs most effectively when only one vendor oversees it.

Can I purchase the radio from Fox Valley?

No. As stated before, it may be necessary to adjust radios to maintain the network. We also need to be able to upgrade equipment as new features and technology becomes available. If an individual owned the radio unit, they would have the right to prohibit other vendors from touching their property. We consulted with a number of authorities before starting this project, and every one of them recommended using a single vendor and maintaining ownership of the network.

Do other communities use these radios?

Yes. The largest network is in Naperville, and it has operated smoothly since 2001. Other communities include Algonquin, Countryside, Northbrook, Hoffman Estates, Lemont, Highland Park, Gurnee, Round Lake, McHenry, Woodridge, and Elmhurst.

Have there been any problems with the radios?

Yes, in some cases. A North Shore community in particular had problems with their network. The problem, to a large extent, was caused because the municipality allowed multiple vendors to install and maintain the radios that caused the network to operate inefficiently leading to slowdowns in alarm signal transmissions.

I have a fire alarm system that is currently monitored by a private company. Do I have to connect to the City?

Yes. During routine testing of fire alarms, the Fire Prevention Division has noticed a considerable lag in the time between when an alarm is activated, and the private companies call the 911 Center. Sometimes this lag has been more than 5 minutes. The Fire Prevention Bureau has had several circumstances where alarms monitored by private companies have been out of service for some time. In order to reduce response times and maintain better oversight of fire alarms, the fire department recommended that the City adopt an ordinance requiring fire alarms that are required by the fire prevention code be directly connected to the City.

I have a fire alarm system in my home. Do I have to connect to the City?

No. Only fire alarms that are required by the fire code, such as in stores, schools, apartments, offices and places of assembly are required to be directly connected to the city.

Our company policy requires our fire alarm be monitored by a private alarm company, or our company has a proprietary fire alarm monitoring system. Are we required to connect to the City?

Yes. You may keep your current alarm company if you wish, but you must also connect to the City.

My private alarm company calls me before notifying the fire department to prevent false alarms. Won't there be more false alarms if the city requires me to connect directly to them?

Yes. However, the fire department prefers to respond to a false alarm rather than face the possibility that a serious situation is not being reported. Very often the fire department is able to assist the occupants with smoke removal or other types of clean-up. The fire department will also complete a report of the incident noting any equipment involved. Often tabulating these reports can lead to new fire prevention programs or highlight potential problems.

Will I be billed if I have a false alarm?

The fire department starts billing after the second false alarm. The purpose for billing is to encourage alarm users who have faulty alarms to repair or upgrade their systems. Alarms caused by cooking, steam, inadvertently activating a pull station, or other legitimate reasons are not counted. Billing may also be used to encourage alarm users who habitually trip their fire alarms to change their practices. For example, constantly burning popcorn in the microwave. After the third false alarm, the Fire Prevention Division will visit the property and work with the occupants to resolve the problem to prevent further accidental activations.

What is the charge for monitoring?

The monthly fee for radio monitoring is \$64.00. Just for a comparison, the average monthly charge for a dedicated phone line is \$60.00 along with a current monthly monitoring cost of \$28.00. As you can see, switching to wireless monitoring can actually save you \$24.00 per month.

How often will these rates be changed?

The current contract is good for five years. After that time, the fees will be renegotiated.