

911 in reverse: New System alerts residents

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The town's newly activated Reverse 911 system allows residents to be informed about major emergencies with the touch of a button.

By Gina Pace

As Tropical Storm Noel barreled toward South Florida last month, town leaders in Bay Harbor Islands warned thousands of residents to secure their homes, and also informed them that the town's Halloween festivities had been canceled -- all with the touch of a button.

It was the first use of the town's newly activated "Reverse 911" system, which calls residents in the event of natural disasters, road closings, missing children or police emergencies and provides a recorded message with information or instructions.

The town's approximately 2,000 households with listed phone numbers were automatically included in the system. Residents with unlisted numbers or those who only have cell phones can also register to receive updates and alerts, said assistant town manager J.C. Jimenez.

The system cost about \$42,000 -- a worthwhile expense, said Vice Mayor Kenneth Weinstein.

"We are very vulnerable community for hurricane-type of disasters because we are comprised of barrier islands," Weinstein said. "Early warning is very important to us."

Weinstein heads the town's Disaster Preparedness Committee, which oversaw implementation of the Reverse 911 system. The committee has also published a hurricane manual for residents, and held disaster preparedness symposiums and training sessions for town staff on emergency management.

In serious emergencies, responses may be required, Jimenez said. If a response is not received, town staff would visit the residents to ensure they are alright.

Also in the works: a "guardian calling" feature, which would allow older residents to register to receive periodic calls. If they don't respond with specific information, the town would send someone to check on them.

Resident Frank Waxman said he was pleasantly surprised by the call about Tropical Storm Noel.

"When you get a call like that, you feel grateful that the city is watching over you," Waxman said. "It is a very creative thing to do. You don't have to place a call to them -- they are outthinking you and will call you first."