



Legislation Text

File #: 18-392, **Version:** 1

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SUBJECT: Update on Celebrate Safe Illegal Fireworks Enforcement and Public Outreach Campaign

REPORT IN BRIEF

Provides an update on the 2018 Fourth of July Celebrate Safe Campaign and efforts to address illegal fireworks within the City.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the City Council accept the report and provide staff with recommendations and direction for addressing issues related to the use of illegal fireworks for next year's Fourth of July holiday.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Refer to staff for reconsideration of specific items as requested by Council; or,
2. Continue to a future City Council meeting (date and time to be specified in the motion).

AUTHORITY

City Charter Section 200.

CITY COUNCIL PRIORITIES

The inaugural Celebrate Safe Campaign was developed by Staff at the direction of the City Council and City Manager to enhance public safety on and around the Fourth of July holiday.

DISCUSSION

The use of illegal fireworks on and around the Fourth of July holiday is an issue that effects most cities and communities across the state. The attendant explosions caused by the use of illegal fireworks disturbs the peace and can cause stress for residents, veterans and pets. In addition, the explosives used are powerful and create a risk of serious bodily injury and property damage.

Following the Fourth of July holiday in 2017, at the direction of the City Council, the City Manager asked four City departments to develop a taskforce and campaign to address the issues associated with illegal fireworks. This led to the creation of the Illegal Fireworks Taskforce, which was made up of representatives from the City's Police, Fire and Information Technology Departments as well as the City Attorney's Office.

The Taskforce's goal was to promote public safety by reducing the number of illegal fireworks being used within the City. To accomplish this goal, the Taskforce developed four primary objectives:

1. **Public Outreach** - Develop campaign to promote the City's Zero Tolerance and Be a Good Neighbor slogans to remind the public of consequences of illegal fireworks and the effects that they may have on neighbors, pets and military veterans.
2. **Illegal Fireworks Surrender and Seizure** - Host a Safe Surrender Day to provide the public with an opportunity to surrender illegal fireworks without fear of prosecution. Seize illegal fireworks being sold in the City.
3. **Tip lines** - Development of multiple avenues to report illegal fireworks, including a dedicated tip telephone line, the Merced Connect App, and an email address. Also set up an expanded dispatch on July 3rd and 4th for the purpose of removing a bulk of the calls reporting illegal fireworks from the 9-1-1 center.
4. **Enforcement** - Increase police patrol/enforcement and fire department personnel on the 3rd and 4th of July for administrative citations and criminal citations/arrests.

Overall, the public's response to the City's campaign was positive. Below is a review of the Taskforce's objectives.

Objective 1. Public Outreach

The Taskforce developed a multifaceted public outreach campaign which included utility bill inserts, street banners, numerous newspaper articles, posters, radio announcements, stickers and a kick off press conference. These materials displayed or communicated the Zero Tolerance and Be a Good Neighbor slogans along with the Celebrate Safe tip line number, email address and Merced Connect icon image. On July 3rd and 4th, there were approximately 470 reports of possession, sales or use of illegal fireworks to these alternative reporting methods. This shows that the public outreach campaign was successful in educating the public to report illegal fireworks and to do so by using a dedicated method and not calling 9-1-1. The banners and posters used for this year's campaign can be reused in future campaigns.

Objective 2. Surrender or Seizure of Illegal Fireworks

Safe Surrender

The Fire Department organized and advertised a Safe Surrender Day, which was held at Station 51 on June 30, 2018, from 9:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. This event provided residents the opportunity to surrender illegal fireworks safely without the fear of prosecution. Two residents surrendered illegal fireworks at this event, and while doing so, they thanked the department for their efforts in getting illegal fireworks seized and safely disposed. In addition, two other couples stopped by the station to thank the department for their efforts (they did not surrender any fireworks). The fact that illegal fireworks were surrendered during this event accomplished the objective set for the event. The surrendered illegal fireworks were not discharged thus eliminating any risk of possible injuries and/or property damage.

Sting Operations

The City's DART Team was successful in conducting several sting operations prior to July 4th on individuals advertising illegal fireworks for sale on Craigslist. These stings led to the arrests of 5 individuals on felony charges. One of these arrests involved 782 illegal fireworks estimated to be worth \$1,500. These arrests were highlighted as part of the Zero Tolerance campaign and resulted in other advertisements for illegal fireworks being removed from Craigslist.

In total, including the fireworks received at the Safe Surrender event, the sting operations and those seized on July 4th, the City confiscated about 650 pounds of illegal fireworks.

Objective 3- Tip lines

The goal of this objective was to keep reports of illegal fireworks from inundating the City's 9-1-1 system. To accomplish this, the City's IT Department set up a tip line (388-Safe), a dedicated email address (Celebratesafe@cityofmerced.org) and a module on the Merced Connect App to report illegal fireworks. These alternate ways to report illegal fireworks received a total of 470 reports on July 3rd and 4th, which demonstrates that there was good community buy-in for the program. A breakdown of these reports is as follows:

Method of Reporting	July 3, 2018	July 4, 2018	Total
Celebrate Safe Hotline	38 calls	302 calls	340 calls
Merced Connect	34 reports	76 reports	110 reports
Email	9 emails	11 emails	20 emails
Totals	81	389	470

Notably, of the above calls, the tip line received more than 20 calls reporting illegal fireworks in neighboring jurisdictions such as Delhi, Planada and Atwater. These callers called the Merced tip line seeking the City's help with illegal fireworks in their communities. In addition, 6 calls to the hotline were transferred directly to a 9-1-1 dispatcher as the caller was reporting a non-firework emergency.

One negative factor that effected the ability to respond to calls made to the tip line involved reluctant reporters. Specifically, numerous callers called to report the use of illegal fireworks but they refused to identify themselves or provide a contact number for law enforcement to use to follow up on their reports. In addition, many callers reported the use of illegal fireworks in vicinities rather than providing specific addresses or locations. This made it difficult for law enforcement officers to locate the area in which the illegal fireworks were being discharged.

Objective 4- Enforcement

The City allows the use and sale of Safe and Sane fireworks from noon on June 28 until noon on July 6th. This year, the Fourth of July holiday fell on a Wednesday. As many of our working residents have the day off on July 4th, the Taskforce surmised that the use of illegal fireworks may spike on the evening of July 3rd as well as the 4th. Accordingly, during the permissible Safe and Sane fireworks sales and usage period, the Taskforce's enforcement efforts focused on July 3rd and 4th. On those evenings there were extra police and fire personnel on duty for enforcement and emergency response. In addition, a separate dispatch center was staffed by volunteer City employees to handle calls, emails and Merced Connect reports of illegal fireworks. As it turned out, there was a drastic difference in the number of reports of illegal fireworks usage between the evenings of July 3rd and 4th

with 81 reports on July 3rd and 389 reports being made on July 4th. Based on these stats, next year's campaign could focus its heavy enforcement efforts on July 4th.

This year on the 3rd and 4th of July, the City's dispatch center received only a slight increase in calls compared to last year. The below table summarizes those calls:

Calls	2017	2018	Percentage Increase
9-1-1 Calls	483	485	.5% Increase
Abandoned Calls	21	27	28% Increase

Had the separate dispatch center not been in operation to answer calls reporting illegal fireworks from the tip line, the calls to the City's 9-1-1 system would have drastically increased this year.

While the number of fire incidents decreased for the 4th of July holiday in 2018, overall, the number of incidents increased, mostly due to an increased in EMS calls. Below is a summary of incidents for the reporting period of June 28 through July 6th for 2017 and 2018:

Incident Type	2017	2018
Fires	27	20
EMS	124	153
Hazardous Condition	4	3
Service Call	10	14
Good Intent	33	35
False Alarm	10	11
Total Incidents	218	240

On the evenings of July 3rd and 4th, the Merced Fire Department only responded to 1 structure fire, which was caused by the disposal of illegal and legal fireworks into a garbage can. In addition 12 administrative citations for the use of illegal fireworks were issued, each having a \$1,000 fine.

IMPACT ON CITY RESOURCES

N/A.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Presentation