

Portland looking for better emergency notification system after E. coli scare

By [James Mayer, The Oregonian](#)

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Brent

Wojahn/The OregonianQuanti-Trays, almost the size of license plates, test for E. coli . The bottom sample was made Friday at Reservoir No. 3. The top sample was taken at OHSU on Saturday.

Don Carlson and his wife ordered water at a restaurant in Northwest Portland on Saturday night, and that's how they found out about the city's E. coli contamination alert.

"Otherwise, we wouldn't have heard about it," Carlson said, until they got up on Sunday morning and read the newspaper or turned on a football game, where the warning was scrolling at the bottom of TV screens.

By then, the alert to boil water would have been at least 12 hours old -- plenty of time to sip from the tap.

The city needs to do better, Mayor Sam Adams and Commissioner Randy Leonard said Monday.

And they have some ideas, started when Adams was embarrassed a year ago during the relentless wave of storms that dumped more than a foot of snow on the city in many places.

They're looking into technology that can contact residents on cell phones and via e-mail and social networking sites such as Twitter, as well as over land lines.

For the weekend E. coli alert, the city issued a press release and sent it to all the city's news outlets. City officials also personally notified Oregon Health & Science University, Portland State University and the Oregon Restaurant Association.

"We've been working on a couple of things since the arctic blast of last winter," Adams said.

"I don't want to repeat what happened when I, the mayor, asked people to leave their cars at home or work and take transit while transit was shut down because of the storm," he said.

One initiative is a Web site, publicalerts.org, that is a clearinghouse for all kinds of emergency information, from that of schools and utilities to law enforcement. The city is testing the site, and Adams expects it to be fully operational soon.

The second project is a telephone notification system along the lines of the one used by [Portland Public Schools](#) to let families know about school closures.

"When we have an event, we need a better system to notify the public," said Leonard, who oversees the [Water Bureau](#). "Sam and I want to ramp this discussion up, to find out how to procure the technology."

Holiday delay

All the fuss began Thursday when a water sample from the No. 3 reservoir in Washington Park showed weak signs of E. coli. The city retested the sample as required but delayed it because of the Thanksgiving Day holiday.

When the results of the retest came in positive Saturday, the city obtained state authority to issue a notice to boil water for the west side of the city. The word went out to the public around 5 p.m.

The city plans to seek proposals for a new notification system at the beginning of the new year. The system will be expensive, said Water Bureau Director David Shaff, but he didn't have a figure.

Other major cities have land line emergency notification systems but not cell phone systems, Adams said. "Everyone has struggled with it," he said.

The percentage of Portlanders with only land phone lines is shrinking, he said, so it makes sense to also ask people to volunteer their cell phone numbers.

The city would have to ensure that everyone's numbers would remain private, he said. "No one is going to sign up for it if they think the numbers might be sold or shared with anybody else," he said.

People now generally don't give their phone numbers to the Water Bureau when they sign up for service, though the bureau asks people who call its customer service line for emergency contact numbers.

Leonard said one idea would be to send a message out with the water bill, asking customers how they would like to be contacted in an emergency.

Adams said he also has asked the Revenue Bureau to begin collecting contact information from business license applicants.

Existing systems

In the metro area, Oregon City and Tigard have telephone emergency notification systems. Mike Lueck, emergency management director for Tigard, said the city recently notified water customers about a flushing procedure that would discolor their tap water.

The Tigard system uses utility billing as the main source of phone numbers, and the city asks the public for additional numbers, such as cell phone numbers.

The issue of acquiring phone numbers is easier for the Portland school notification system, known as the rapid broadcast system. Every parent gives the school an emergency contact number when their children are registered. And the phone message system can "talk" to the district's student database, so whenever a phone number is changed, the system is automatically updated.

The district can send a message to every household or call a specific school area or a specific class, said spokesman Matt Shelby.

"We used it pretty extensively during the Marysville school fire," Shelby said, and it worked well.

-- [James Mayer](#)