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Officials respond to alarm concerns

By JOSEPH BUSTOS - jbustos@nwherald.com
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McHENRY – State officials said Friday that they want to work with alarm companies and municipalities to see whether the sides can come to an agreement over who should monitor fire alarms.

Business owners shared their concerns with state Sen. Pam Althoff, R-McHenry, and state Rep. Mike Tryon, R-Crystal Lake, about decisions by municipalities to require businesses to have fire alarms monitored by city dispatch centers.

McHenry recently decided to go to a wireless alarm monitoring system. Businesses that need alarms have to switch to the city's monitoring system by 2016, which has upset some city business owners.

Crystal Lake, the Algonquin-Lake in the Hills Fire District, and Woodstock have bought wireless systems and require businesses with fire alarms to have their alarms monitored by the municipal dispatch system.

In the meeting organized by the Illinois Electronic Security Association, the organization called these decisions a creation of government monopolies.

Under the ordinances, businesses do not have a choice on who monitors their alarms. Businesses, however, can choose the type of alarm they want.

Tryon and Althoff said they still were learning the specifics about the issue.

They offered to help facilitate a meeting with municipal officials, business owners and alarm companies to see whether they can work together.

Tryon and Althoff have a meeting scheduled in August with municipalities and fire departments to learn their side of the issue, Althoff said.

“Obviously there are concerns,” Tryon said. “I assume there was a problem that needed correcting, and it seemed to be the way to do it, but I kind of like free-market choices. It will be interesting to see how this works out, if it works out.”

Local municipalities and fire departments say the move is to help improve response times to emergencies and to help reduce false alarms

that frequently occur under the old systems that connected alarms to telephone lines.

Patrick Devereaux, senior vice president of EMERgency 24 in Des Plaines, said the private alarm industry always was developing new technologies. He said wireless systems were 15 years old.

"You are being saddled with a 15-year-old technology now and will be saddled with it for the next decade or two," Devereaux said.

Kevin Lehan, the executive director of the Illinois Electronic Security Association, said the municipalities did not perform enough research when deciding whether to implement a wireless system and figuring out the best price for customers.

Crystal Lake Fire Chief Jim Moore said the city worked with a fire safety consultant before making a decision to ask for proposals for a new system.

"As the fire safety professional, I want to have the alarm monitored here in the same center that dispatches the firefighters, so there are no delays in service," Moore said.

Peter Friedman, an attorney for Crystal Lake, said this is not a government monopoly. He pointed out that companies had an opportunity put in proposals to run the city's system. He also pointed to other services that local governments provide, such as garbage pickup.

"There's a lot of things governments provide that it doesn't make sense to have 10 vendors doing it," Friedman said.

Ron Bykowski, who owns Century Properties in McHenry, pays \$64 a month to have his alarm monitored by Fox Valley Fire and Safety. That amount will go up to \$90 a month to have his alarms monitored on the city system.

Bykowski said he went to a wireless system three years ago.

"What we would like to see is an amendment to the ordinance that would allow the business owners to have a choice," Bykowski said. "Whether to have monitoring done by the city, or by a private central station monitoring company. ... I think the business community would be behind it."

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