

CRIES OF WOLF TAXING LARGO POLICE

BY: Carlos Moncada

LARGO -- More than nine out of 10 burglar alarms here turn out to be false.

Last year, less than 1 percent of more than 1,900 burglar or intruder alarms that Largo police answered were actual emergencies, figures show. The remainder were false alarms that averaged three to five per day, taking up 4.5 to 7.5 hours of police manpower away from those in legitimate need.

has consistently been above 99 percent, figures show. Last year, only five of the 1,907 burglar alarms Largo police answered were valid signals of trouble, figures show. In 2023, eight of 1,931 alarms were genuine emergencies. And in 2022, only two of 1,851 alarms were legitimate.

The measure is scheduled for a second and final reading and public hearing on March 18. It would give business owners up to two free police responses per year before slapping

2022-2024 Alarms By Close-out Code

| Year | # of Alarms | Valid Alarms | % of Valid Alarm |
|------|-------------|--------------|------------------|
| 2022 | 1851 | 2 | .11% |
| 2023 | 1931 | 8 | .41% |
| 2024 | 1907 | 5 | .26% |

Now, city leaders are taking aim at what has become an exercise in futility for police officers who instead of chasing down cries of wolf should be patrolling neighborhoods or responding to real crimes.

"I'm actually shocked by the amount of these and how little are real," Commissioner Mike DiBrizzi said during the Feb. 18 Largo City Commission meeting.

Under a proposal that won unanimous commission approval on first reading, businesses -- and to a lesser extent, residents -- would face

them with a \$50 fee on the third violation.

On a motion offered by Mayor Woody Brown and later approved, the fourth violation also would draw a \$50 fee rather than \$100. Five to seven violations a year would incur fees ranging from \$100 to \$250 before capping at \$300 for eight or more.

"A lot of businesses will have more than three in a year," said Commissioner Chris Johnson, who owns a fire protection business. "That's going to happen. It does drain our resources, so I understand the need to put a little punch in it so they don't continue to abuse that."

Homeowners would be allowed up to four free police responses a year before facing a \$50 fee on the fifth occurrence. A sixth would cost \$75. The maximum would be \$100 for seven or more violations.

Under the existing fee structure, which hasn't been updated since 1988, both home and business owners are allowed up to five false alarms per year before drawing a \$25 fee for a sixth violation. The fees gradually escalate before maxing out at \$300 for 20 or more violations.

Yet the antiquated measure has done little to deter recurring false alarms over the years, Starling said, even as the number of monitored security systems have grown. The revised fee structure brings it more in line with other Tampa Bay area communities and would help cover the costs for dispatch and police response, rather than turn a profit for the city, she said.

Both home and business owners would have an opportunity to have the first \$50 fee



Photo Courtesy of The City of Largo

escalating new fees for alarm systems that repeatedly summon police for no valid reason.

"We really need to try to curb the alarms more," Deputy Police Chief Ann Starling told commissioners. "We want to put a system in place so we can try to free up the officers more. We really don't want people to be complacent" because of too many false alarms.

The problem isn't unique to Pinellas County's third largest city. Nationwide, 90 to 99 percent of burglar alarms are false, statistics show.

Since 2022, Largo's false alarm rate

...Continued on Pg. 10



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waived if they agree to meet with a crime prevention officer to try and determine the

will be sent to the location at the owner's expense.

False burglar alarms can be caused by a variety of factors. Many are due to mechanical failure or human error. Typically, security

PROPOSED FEE CHANGES - COMMERCIAL

| Snapshot of Proposed False Alarm Fees | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|------------|---------|---------------|--------------|
| Alarm Activations | Largo | Pinellas County | Clearwater | St Pete | Pinellas Park | Pasco County |
| 1 | N/C | N/C | N/C | N/C | N/C | N/C |
| 2 | N/C | N/C | \$50 | N/C | \$50 | N/C |
| 3 | \$50 | \$30 | \$50 | \$50 | \$50 | \$50 |
| 4 | \$100 | \$100 | \$50 | \$100 | \$50 | \$100 |
| 5 | \$200 | \$200 | \$50 | \$200 | \$50 | \$200 |
| 6 | \$250 | \$250 | \$100 | \$300 | \$50 | \$400 |
| 7 | \$300 | \$300 | \$100 | \$300 | \$50 | \$500 |
| 8 | \$300 | \$300 | \$100 | \$400 | \$50 | \$500 |
| 9 | \$300 | \$300 | \$100 | \$400 | \$50 | \$500 |
| 10 | \$300 | \$300 | \$100 | \$500 | \$50 | \$500 |

PROPOSED FEE CHANGES - RESIDENTIAL

| Proposed Residential False Alarm Fee Structure | |
|--|---------------------|
| Number of False Alarms | Fee Per False Alarm |
| 1 | No Charge |
| 2 | No Charge |
| 3 | No Charge |
| 4 | No Charge |
| 5 | \$50 |
| 6 | \$75 |
| 7 and each subsequent | \$100 |

cause of the false alarms, Starling said.

"Our goal is not to make money here," she said. **"Our goal here is to curb the number of false alarms that we have."**

Habitual offenders would have up to 30 days to pay any accrued fees. The city uses a private software system, called Cry Wolf, for tracking and billing false alarm calls. Everyone within Largo who has an alarm system monitored by an alarm company must register it with the police department annually, Starling said.

"I don't know that a lot of people know that, or if the alarm companies are actually even informing them of that," said Commissioner Donna Holck about the need to register security systems, for which Starling said there is no initial charge.

Failure to pay the fees "shall result in a discontinuance of police response to alarms that may occur at the premises described" until the charges are paid, according to the proposed ordinance. Typically two to three officers are dispatched out on alarm calls, including a K-9 unit if one is available.

The fire department does not fine people for false alarms, Starling said, although if there's an excessive number a fire inspector

companies call police when a monitored alarm is triggered and is not shut off after a certain time, or they cannot reach the registered owner -- causing police to respond even if there is no emergency.

While the city does have a few "problem places," Starling said the majority of false alarms are "single incidences."

To disarm a false alarm, you need to enter a unique security code on the control panel keyboard. But at many business establishments, workers often enter the wrong series of numbers or are unaware the code was changed, Starling said.

"The employees are punching the code in and it's not working," she said. **"We get those a lot."**

Starling said while protocols are in place to cancel alarms verified as not a real threat, police tend to err on the side of caution, particularly when responding to panic or glass-breaking alarms. And while inclement weather can set off security systems, people are not charged in such situations, she said.

Besides the updated fee schedule, another change would redefine false alarms to exclude victims of criminal activity from being penalized financially. City attorneys recommended the change to comply with the federal Violence Against Women Act of 1994.



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