



PREPARING FOR THE WORST

City Watch on the line in time of need

Subscribers to automated program will get call in event of emergency

By STEPHANIE CAMERON

A hurricane is looming. There's a flood on the waterfront. A fire is raging through the city. If these disasters – or others – happen, clear communication is crucial for everyone involved.

Welcome to City Watch, the automated system that could let your family know what to do in case of an emergency.

Halifax Regional Municipality has had the system in place since 2003, when businesses in Dartmouth's Burnside Park gave it to HRM. Burnside bought the system in 1999 during the Y2K scare.

Many people still don't know what City Watch is or what it does, says HRM Coun. Gary Martin.

Martin, a member of the municipality's Emergency Measures Advisory Committee, is set to take part in an education session today to show the mayor and other councillors what this system can do. Don Denman, vice president of Avtex, the Minnesota company which produces the system, plans to join him to demonstrate the system.

City Watch is an automated computer and phone system that can make simultaneous calls to households across the municipality. Martin says the system started off with 24 phone lines and has grown to 72.

"We have more lines than just about any city in North America."

In the event of an emergency, City Watch allows authorities to record a message about the situation with instructions on what people need to do. Then they select a list of numbers from the system, depending on who they want to contact.

The system automatically calls every number on the list. When people pick up, they hear the recorded message, and the system lets authorities know that the household received the message. It can even tell if an answering machine picked up.

The only problem, says Martin, is that HRM is waiting for federal approval to use the 911 database.

Take for example, says Martin, the Kingswood subdivision fire that took place in 2000 just off Hammonds Plains Road. The whole area had to be evacuated.

"If this took place now and we had the (911) database for that area, within 30 minutes or less we could notify every person within that community of the fire, of the evacu-

ation, where they're to go," he says. "And we would have a computer database there that would tell us which homes picked up the phone, who received it, who didn't, so we could put our resources into the homes that didn't receive it."

The city relies on volunteers to compile the numbers. People can also register on the system by calling HRM's Community Response Team at 490-4070 or 490-4071, or Const. Winnell Jackson, Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator at 490-6977. Even without access to the 911 database, City Watch has a database of almost 20,000 numbers.

"...we can track multiple telephones as well as multiple devices to try and get the message through."

—DON DENMAN

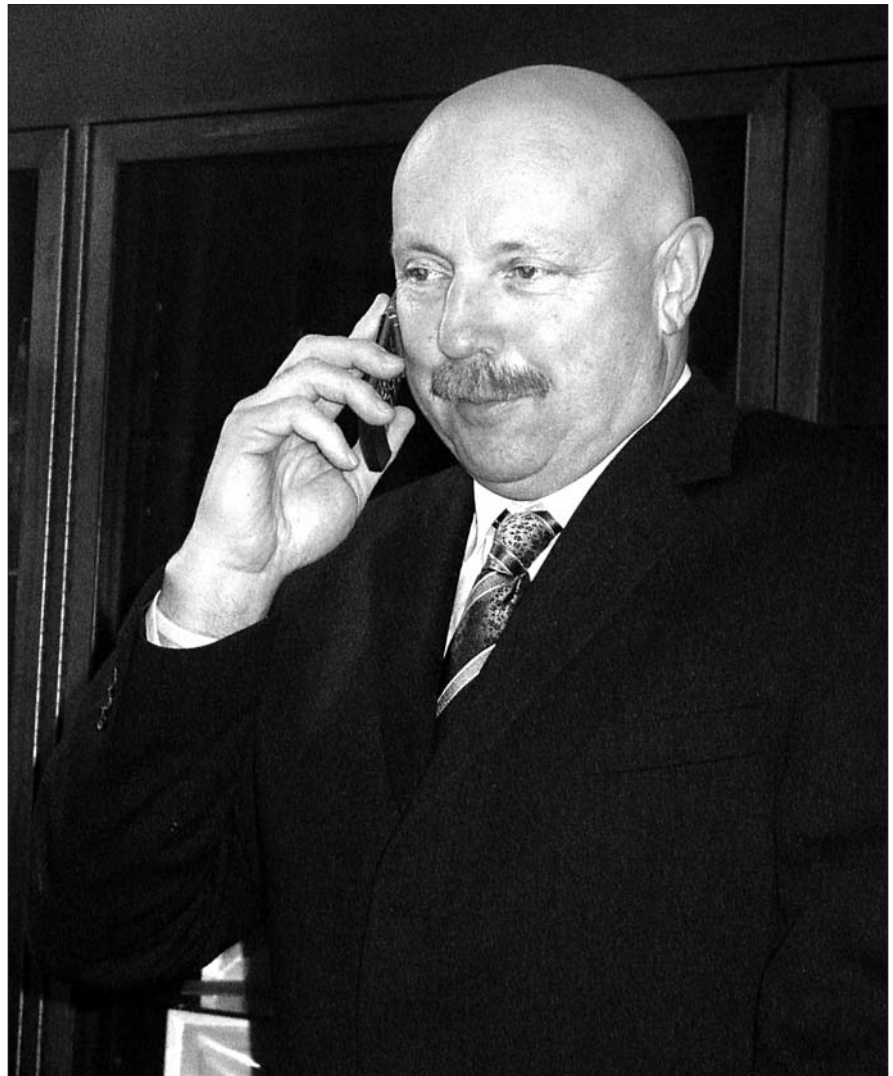
VICE-PRESIDENT OF AVTEX,
CITY WATCH SUPPLIER

City Watch would be effective in an emergency, said Avtex's Denman in an interview. The program has a geographic information systems (GIS) mapping feature that allows authorities to bring up detailed street maps of Halifax and outline the specific geographic area where residents need to be evacuated or notified of a situation.

The system can access landline telephones, cell phones, pagers and wireless devices like BlackBerries. It can send out text messages, faxes, even e-mails. This means if the power goes out or phone lines go down, there is still a good chance you'll get the message.

"It will hit you first on your home phone," says Denman. "If you don't answer there it can 'call escalate' to your cell phone. If you don't answer there, it can call escalate to your office phone. So we can track multiple telephones as well as multiple devices to try and get the message through."

City Watch can be used for



Coun. Gary Martin hopes to teach more people about the benefits of City Watch during today's session.

crime alerts and to send messages about lost children. It can create a list for any group or situation, and send relevant information.

Denman says there are lots of different departments in Halifax that can use the system. The Health Department can send health alerts on a daily basis. The Department of Transportation and Public Works could send notices about road closures or snow emergencies. Even schools in Halifax could use the system to send notices to parents.

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In case of emergency

Want a back-up to City Watch? You can also tune in to Information Radio at 97.9 FM:

- During an emergency, authorities have access to the station so they can make emergency broadcasts.

- Information Radio has a back-up generator, so even if there's a power outage, EMO officials it can still broadcast messages.

Source: Jack McGaw, Information Radio