



CITY OF HOUSTON - CITY COUNCIL

Meeting Date: 12/5/2017

ALL

Item Creation Date: 10/6/2017

ARA-Burglar Alarm Ordinance Amendment

Background:

The Administration and Regulatory Affairs (ARA) Department recommends that City Council approve an ordinance to amend Chapter 11, Article III of the City of Houston Code of Ordinances related to burglar alarm systems to streamline the residential burglar and panic alarm permitting process and allow for permit and false alarm fees to be waived or refunded in the event of declared disasters.

During Hurricane Harvey, many residences across Houston were partially or completely flooded and are uninhabitable. Permit holders who lost their homes in the flood have contacted the City seeking to transfer their permits to new locations or be refunded for false alarm fees triggered during the storm or permits purchased days before their homes were destroyed. Under the current ordinance, alarm permits are nontransferable and ARA does not have the authority to waive fees or refund permits in the event of a declared disaster.

Under the proposed amendments, in the event of a declared disaster, the City would have the ability to:

Transfer Permits: Alarm permits could be transferred to a new or temporary location if the customer's alarm permit account with the City is in good standing at the time of the request and the alarm site became partially or completely uninhabitable because of a declared disaster.

Waive False Alarm Fees and Penalties: False alarm fees and non-permitted system penalties incurred during a declared disaster could be waived administratively; alarm permit holders would not be penalized for false alarms triggered during a declared disaster.

Refund Permit Fees: If a permitted alarm site is deemed uninhabitable due to declared disaster and the permit holder is no longer living at the alarm site, the City would have the ability to refund permit fees altogether for permits purchased 30 days before the disaster was declared.


Additionally, ARA recommends streamlining the permitting process by eliminating the Residential Burglar Alarm Only Permit category, and issuing only combined residential burglar/panic alarm permits. Currently, residential customers can purchase a Combined Burglar/Panic Alarm permit for \$50 or a Residential Burglar Alarm Only permit only for \$39.14. Historically these existed as two permits because burglar alarm systems operated in two different ways: "burglar" alarms are typically set to sound automatically and send a signal to HPD to investigate the breach of a home's window or door. "Panic" alarms require the user to press a panic button to indicate a life-threatening emergency warranting immediate HPD response.

Today nearly all alarm systems include both the burglar and panic alarms, resulting in panic alarms being accidentally triggered. Customers are often unaware that their "burglar alarm" system includes a panic alarm until they receive a \$295 non-permitted penalty fee for a false panic alarm. Combining the two permits into a single residential permit recognizes the change in technology and eliminates the confusion and added penalties residential burglar alarm customers often face.

The cost of the combined burglar/panic permit will remain unchanged at \$50. An estimated 20,000 customers currently have the \$39.14 Residential Burglar Alarm Only permits. To allow these customers to transition to the combination permit, the Residential Burglar Alarm Only permit will be phased out over

the next year and will be completely eliminated by February 2019. During this time, ARA will reach out to customers to educate them on the provisions of the new permit.

Departmental Approval Authority:



**Tina Paez, Director
Administration & Regulatory
Affairs Department**

Other Authorization

Contact Information:

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|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Lara Cottingham | Phone: (832) 393-8503 |
| Kathryn Bruning | Phone: (832) 394-9414 |