




MEMORANDUM

TO: Marc A. Ott, City Manager

FROM: Michael C. McDonald, Deputy City Manager 

DATE: March 12, 2014

SUBJECT: FireWatch America - Wildfire Smoke Detection Technology

For more than a year, key members of the Austin Fire Department have been meeting with Alfred Stanley and Joe Turnham of FireWatch America to discuss the feasibility of installing wildfire smoke detection devices in the City of Austin and Travis County.

The information gathered from these meetings was presented to members of the Joint Wildfire Task Force on March 6, 2014. Collectively, the JWTF was in favor of pursuing a purchase.

It is the recommendation of the Austin Fire Department to partner with Travis County, who we have been in discussions with, to each make an investigatory purchase of one sensor system. Then we would then coordinate with the City of Westlake for a total of three sensor systems for Travis County. We believe we are able to locate at least three suitable tower locations, complete the tower engineering, and place these sensors without adding expensive towers for this program.

One concern we are working through is the sole source criteria necessary for purchasing. We are reviewing current users of the systems in the United States to determine if suitable competitors exist. Thus far, our research has only identified camera based (not smoke and flame) systems used in large forest settings, not the wildland urban interface that Austin/Travis County protects.

A second concern is the staffing required by these semi-automated systems. We do not recommend adding this to the current fire dispatcher work environment. If this system were staffed 24/7 with full time employees, we would require six total staff members for a cost of approximately \$348,000 annually. Instead, we recommend a modified staffing model that follows the National Fire Danger Rating System (NFDRS), staffing only on high to extreme index days. This modified method would require a staff of two to four total members, at an estimated cost of between \$116,000 and \$232,000 a year. Further savings may be achieved by cost-sharing overtime staffing with county and city employees. This program is not budgeted; therefore, funding will need to be identified.

We will present our recommendation to the Public Safety Commission on April 7, 2014. If additional information is needed, please let me know.

Thank you.

Cc: Mayor and Council
Rhoda Mae Kerr, Chief, Austin Fire Department