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Beaverton radio station will air emergency news

WQAD at 1610 on the AM dial also plans to broadcast updates on city programs and events

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DAVID R. ANDERSON

BEAVERTON -- City officials hope their new radio station is a hit but not a smash.

Too much attention for the AM station would mean Beaverton was suffering earthquakes, ice storms, floods or other natural disasters.

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The city's 10-watt radio station -- WQAD (1610) -- goes on the air within the next two weeks.

The main purpose of the Alert AM system is to inform city residents in an emergency: where to pick up sandbags during flooding, which direction an ash plume from Mount St. Helens is headed, which roads are blocked by fallen trees in a storm. The system also will provide information to volunteer members of the Community Emergency Response Team.

The rest of the time, city leaders will try to create an audience by broadcasting a two-hour loop of information about city programs and events repeated 12 times a day. They want it to be interesting enough to draw listeners back.

Maybe, they hope, it will become a preset station for government junkies.

"Will people listen? I have no idea," said Joseph Gall, a Beaverton senior program manager. "I'm always amazed that people watch public-access TV."

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The station might eventually broadcast information about road construction, and city meetings and other live shows.

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"We want to build more and more into it so people won't get bored," Gall said.

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From an antenna atop City Hall at Southwest Griffith Drive and Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway, the station will have a range of about three miles. However, the signal could travel farther depending on weather, topography and radio interference.

OUR AFFI



The city spent nearly \$22,000 in general fund money on the system, said Michael Mumaw, emergency manager. That included nearly \$5,000 for computer software to allow the city to broadcast 24 hours a day.

The system, by Information Station Specialists of Grand Rapids, Mich., is regulated by the Federal Communications Commission. It can't compete with commercial stations and is prohibited from broadcasting business names, commercials or music.

Information Station Specialists has sold about 300 systems to cities across the country, said Bill Baker, company president. When telephones and electricity are out, the radio station often offers the best means of spreading information, Baker said.

And daily broadcasts about city activities and events can reduce the number of telephone calls.

Other Northwest cities with the system include Camas, Wash., and Ashland and Umatilla in Oregon, Baker said. Portland International Airport and Crater Lake National Park also use the system.

Gresham purchased an AM system and went on the air about a month ago with WQCA (1610). City officials have been broadcasting the weather report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Like Beaverton, Gresham is taking its time to develop local programming.

"We don't want people to listen and say, 'That's boring' and won't tune in again," said Cathy Harrington, Gresham's emergency management coordinator.

Gresham used a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for the \$28,258 cost, Harrington said.

Gresham plans to put up signs around the city that will blink to inform drivers to tune into the station during emergencies.

Hillsboro officials do not have plans for a similar radio station, but they are watching Beaverton's experiment, said Sharon Kennedy, Hillsboro's emergency manager.

Beaverton listeners will hear several voices on the city's station, including Gall's. He supervises mediation, recycling and neighborhood associations. Radio announcer is a new job description.

"It's certainly not something I thought I would be doing when I got into government," Gall said.

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