

February 23, 2026

*Pitting a Single Gondola Against 119 Emergency Warning Sirens*  
**Why Is Mayor Failing to Restore Emergency Sirens?**

**The City's "Emergency Warning Sirens" System Is Still Turned Off Current Seven-Year Delay to Evaluate a Solution Isn't Acceptable, But May Extend Another Six Years!**

What's more important to San Franciscans:

1. District 7 Supervisor Melgar's proposal for a single gondola for transportation of patients and visitors between the Forest Hill MUNI station up the hillside to Laguna Honda Hospital, or
2. Reactivation of San Francisco's Outdoor Public Warning System (OPWS) that have been silent for seven years since they were shut off in December 2019?

That question is a matter of priorities for San Franciscans writ large, but has been relegated to being a "policy decision" of elected City officials, and mid-level City Hall managers and appointees.

In December 2023, the *Westside Observer* published an [article](#) regarding San Francisco's "Emergency Warning Siren System" in a tribute article to Nancy Wuertel noting it is a key component of our City's disaster planning and preparedness. At the time, initial costs were estimated to have grown from \$2 to \$2.5 million to upgrade the **entire** 119-siren outdoor emergency warning system after they were shut off in 2019, to ~\$7.5 million to reactivate.

Two years later, the *Westside Observer* followed up in January 2025 with a second [article](#) that reported costs to replace and reactive the entire system had grown to potentially \$20 million to \$24 million.

Then, in response to a records request the *Westside Observer* placed on February 23, 2026 San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management (DEM) provided an old "[Next Steps](#)" memo dated December 6, 2024 (that DEM had not provided to previous records requests) which appears to be the most recent effort by DEM to address getting the warning sirens turned back on.

The "[Next Steps](#)" memo revealed that the December 2024 estimated cost to reactive just 112 of the 119 sirens had reached \$20.8 million and may take fully six more years to bring back online, once the project actually receives an approved budget allocation. Adding six years to the already seven-year absence of the sirens means they will have been off-line for at least 13 years, assuming no further delays.

Alternatively, DEM also proposes to just turn on 35 of the sirens at a cost of \$8.5 million (up \$1 million from previous estimates) — by only "*prioritizing tsunami inundation and evacuation zones, and coastal areas,*" for a *partial* fix.

As another alternative, DEM indicated some vendors proposed using portable trailer-mounted sirens as a potential alternative to a fixed system. But typically, trailer-mounted speakers are only used to **supplement** fixed mounted siren systems, not replace fixed systems entirely. Unlike sirens permanently mounted at fixed sites, trailer-mounted sirens require set-up and staging in areas where they are needed, which is impractical and not always feasible during short-notice events. And another limitation of trailer-mounted sirens is they may not provide full coverage of an area unless multiple mobile units are deployed, in addition to their \$378,000 per-unit costs.



**Emergency Warning Sirens** — did San Francisco's outdoor warning sirens go silent to provide a home for morning doves? Let's protect endangered species. but not protect San Franciscans?

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**What's more important: A single gondola for transportation of patients and visitors to Laguna Honda Hospital, or reactivation of San Francisco's Outdoor Public Warning System (OPWS)?**

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Disturbingly, DEM asserts that whether to fund a *partial* or *complete* restoration of the OPWS system is a **policy** question. Later DEM asserts “*Funding is a policy question that would be determined by the Mayor, Board of Supervisors, Committee on Information Technology, Capital Planning Committee, and other stakeholders.*” DEM’s hubris is palpable, because left out of the policy decision-making debate are everyday San Franciscans, as if our voices and preferences — and our votes at the ballot box — about setting City policies are irrelevant!

District 4 Supervisor Alan Wong admirably introduced File #260142 on February 24, 2026 to the full Board of Supervisors, titled “***Emergency Preparedness, Restoration of Outdoor Public Warning System.***”

Each District Supervisor needs to rapidly sign on as a co-sponsor to Wong’s resolution, and pass it unanimously. Then, they need to get to work to identify funding to rapidly repair the noon warning sirens and bring them back on-line by the end of calendar year 2026! Voters in each District are closely watching their action — or inaction — on this!

The siren system *must* be declared an urgent matter for the City, and funding be identified and dedicated rapidly to bring the sirens back on-line, as *Priority Number 1* for the City. They should not have been offline for seven years already! *It’s way past time the Department of Emergency Management (DEM) stop “studying” this problem and move on to taking real action!*

And the City’s Capital Planning Committee (CPC) must be told to rapidly identify funding sources for the noon sirens in the upcoming Fiscal Year 2026–2027 City budget. Ten of the CPC’s 11-members are unelected City departments heads, who are **not** accountable to San Francisco’s voters.

After all, if the siren system were to cost \$7.5 million, that represents just 0.047% of the City’s current \$15.9 billion-dollar City budget. Alternatively, even if restoring all of the City’s 119 sirens into service were to cost \$20 million, that again represents just 0.1257% — just over one-tenth of one percent — of the \$15.9 billion annual City budget. This is a ridiculously small percentage of spending to help all San Franciscans be more adequately alerted in the event of any number of public disasters. It’s the **least** the City should be doing, and can surely afford!

The outdoor warning sirens need to be based on using the City’s 800 MHz radio system DEM that operates at 1011 Turk Street as a highly secure, resilient backbone as the most efficient platform on which to host the analog siren system! After all, the *AlertSF* system was to be a redundant backup system to the sirens, the latter of which came first!

DEM has wrongly “*framed*” the outdoor warning system as being a **backup** system, as a redundancy matter. That’s completely backwards. The siren system had come **first**, and all of the radio, broadcast TV, and digital alert systems connecting to the Internet, and eventually to cell phones, came later, as additional tools to **bolster the warning siren system**. The sirens were installed back in 1942 to warn residents of potential air raids during World War II. The City’s *AlertSF* system became operational 50 years **later** in 2011 or 2012. So, *AlertSF* is the actual “*additional tool*,” and is somewhat redundant to the long history of developing our public alert warning systems.

As Supervisor Wong’s Resolution in File #260142 notes, San Francisco’s outdoor public warning system, consisting of approximately 119 sirens located throughout the City, was taken offline in December 2019 due to **potential** cybersecurity concerns, because the sirens were susceptible to being hacked and manipulated, and has remained non-operational for six years. Not an **actual** risk of being hacked or manipulated, but a **potential** for being at susceptible risk of being hacked.

On December 5, 2024 the 7.0 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Humboldt County triggered a tsunami warning for San Francisco, during which the City lacked a functional outdoor warning system to supplement cell phone alerts, requiring first responders to physically drive to Ocean Beach with loudspeakers to warn residents.

San Francisco’s December 20, 2025 power outage, which affected approximately 130,000 San Francisco PG&E customers for up to 48 hours, demonstrated the vulnerability of relying solely on cell phone-based emergency alerts, as resident’s phones lost battery power and with it, their ability to receive emergency notifications or contact 9–1–1.

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The August 2023 Maui wildfires, which killed over 100 people in Lahaina, demonstrated both the limitations of cell phone-based alerts during power outages and the need for outdoor warning systems capable of broadcasting specific evacuation instructions.

Supervisor Wong’s proposed Resolution indicates San Francisco’s *AlertSF* system, while valuable, has only approximately 195,000 subscribers out of more than 800,000 residents, leaving the majority of the population without opt-in emergency notifications.

San Francisco’s Department of Emergency Management (DEM) claimed in December 2024 that *AlertSF* only had 195,000 San Francisco residents subscribe to “*AlertSF*,” out of 809,000 City residents, just 24.1% of San Franciscans. That leaves 75.9% of San Franciscans vulnerable in the event of any disaster — and they won’t receive any kind of alerts!

But in response to a records request placed on December 5, 2024 DEM provided an Excel file that showed *AlertSF* had just 48,192 subscribers — just 5.96% of San Franciscans. By analyzing the Zip Codes and City names, only 36,152 of the 48,192 live in San Francisco — **reducing *AlertSF* subscribers to just 4.5% of San Franciscans** (36,152 of 809,000).

That *AlertSF* may actually only reach 4.5% of San Franciscans is unacceptable, and suggests that the City’s failure to urgently fund and bring the Outdoor Public Warning Siren system back online is placing hundreds of thousands of San Franciscans’ lives at great risk.

Since the sirens went silent, we have seen projected costs escalate from \$3 million to \$7 million, then to at last count perhaps \$20 million. But it’s hard to believe the veracity of these figures, because after DEM’s began an RFI (Request for Information) process in April 2024, it has never advanced during 2025 to issuing an actual competitive-bid RFP (Request for Proposal) to obtain locked-in cost estimates

A City Hall press release on August 24, 2023 reported that then-Mayor Breed had joined then-Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin to announce plans to prioritize upgrading the City’s Outdoor Public Warning System (OPWS) during an August 2023 Mayor’s Disaster Council meeting.

The press release noted:

*“Anyone who lived in San Francisco before December 2019 knows all too well the familiar Tuesday noon sirens test and the assurance that came with this safety message that boomed throughout the City,” said Mayor London Breed. “The recent devastation in Maui was a tragic example of how important emergency notifications to residents, businesses and tourists are, and although we historically have had minimal need to use the sirens in San Francisco, we must be ready when the time comes. This additional tool will bolster our City’s existing comprehensive alert and warning system.”*

*“While I was initially disappointed that this critical investment in our public safety infrastructure was not funded in the City’s Capital Plan, I am delighted that we were able to collaborate and find funds to finally get the Warning System back up and running,” said Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin.*

According to that press release, funds to reactivate the sirens had reportedly been identified by Breed and Peskin. So why hasn’t the siren system been turned back on yet? **What happened to those funds identified in 2023?**

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**Emergency Warning Sirens’** — jaw-dropping seven-year silence, coupled by City Hall silence on funding to restore sirens.

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The Board of Supervisors **must** support the restoration of the outdoor public warning system as an important component of a comprehensive emergency alert strategy for protecting the lives and safety of San Franciscans, not just those who live in tsunami evacuation zones and coastal areas, since emergencies are typically citywide, not just confined to specific San Francisco neighborhoods.

It appears the project hit a snag and stalled for all of 2025 — until Supervisor Wong introduced his Resolution to prioritize the project in February 2026.

If Mayor Lurie hopes to have any chance of being re-elected three years from now, he needs to prioritize funding to bring the OPWS system back online rapidly, before a disaster strikes under his watch as Mayor.

San Franciscans expect Lurie to get this problem solved, and that the Mayor work with DEM to develop and conclude an approved budget allocation — for the next Fiscal Year 2026–2027 City budget set to begin on July 1, 2026. After all, DEM’s “Next Steps” document indicates that from the time an approved budget allocation is obtained, and an actual is RFP issued and awarded for the project, it will take 36 months — or longer — to install and activate the **complete** siren system.

DEM’s “Next Steps” memo on December 6, 2024 stated:

*“Upon approved budget allocation, bringing the system back online would take an estimated 3 years to 6 years to complete, issue a request for proposals (RFP), contract initiation, hardware installation, systems integration.”*

There was no explanation given for why the 36-month timeline shown in 2024 might require an additional three (now six) years.

Ask yourselves: Rather than funding a single gondola project in a single City supervisorial district for Laguna Honda Hospital, shouldn’t restoring the **complete** 119-siren warning system be the City’s first priority?

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*Monette-Shaw is a columnist for San Francisco’s Westside Observer newspaper, and a member of the California First Amendment Coalition (FAC) and the ACLU. He is a Childless (and catless) Cat Daddy, and voter for 50 years. He operates [stopLHHdownsize.com](http://stopLHHdownsize.com). Contact him at [monette-shaw@westsideobserver.com](mailto:monette-shaw@westsideobserver.com).*