



City of Cambridge Police Department

TELEPHONE
(617) 349-3300

FAX
(617) 349-3320

WEB
www.cambridgepolice.org

Robert C. Haas
Police Commissioner

Richard C. Rossi
City Manager

To: Richard C. Rossi, City Manager

From: Robert C. Haas, Police Commissioner

Date: Wednesday, October 8, 2014

Ref.: City Council Order #2, dated, September 29, 2014

Dear Sir:

As requested, I am responding to City Council Order #2, dated September 29, 2014, which relates to fully informing residents when there may be a concern for public safety, specifically in reference to the two recent attacks on women at the Fresh Pond Reservation.

In terms of the two incidents indicated in this City Council Order, I wanted to provide brief background information on the two incidents and how the department handled each of those incidents. I also wanted to take this opportunity to describe in some detail as it relates to the current practice in determining when it is appropriate to send out a community alert and the methods in which we send out alerts. I also wanted to address some of the complications that are associated with the deliberative process we go through when thinking about when and why we do send out these alerts.

The first incident occurred back on July 15th when a woman was walking in the Fresh Pond Reservation and was approached from behind by an unknown assailant. In this situation the suspect was on a bicycle and rode up behind the victim and inappropriately grabbed her. The victim described the assailant as wearing a black mask at the time of the assault. On the following day, the department did issue a citywide Citizen's Observer alert, fully describing the incident, providing safety information, and enlisting any information. Additionally, the notification (which included a detailed description of the suspect) was posted on Cambridge Police Department's social media networks and distributed to local Cambridge and greater Boston media outlets to create widespread awareness around the incident and to seek broader assistance in identifying a prospective suspect. A press conference was held by the police and the story was referenced in more than 45 newscasts on July 16th and July 17th.

The second incident occurred on September 16th at approximately 12:00 noon. This incident involved a 50-year old-female who was the victim of an unarmed robbery while walking along the path at Fresh Pond Reservation opposite 515 Concord Ave. The suspect was targeting the woman's wallet (not the victim). The victim was only able to provide a very limited description of the suspect (jeans and hooded sweatshirt). In reviewing the case, there was consensus among the Commanding Officer of the Investigations Section, Crime Analysis Unit, and the Director of Communications to withhold an alert at that time, and use this opportunity to conduct a covert surveillance of the area to see if the suspect could be apprehended. It was further considered that if this was an isolated incident and did not reoccur, a community alert would not be issued. To date, there have been no other incidents.

Over the last few years, the criteria used in deciding when to release information in the form of a community alert has continually evolved. As we continue to think about when it is appropriate to push out community alerts, the department has broadened its application of community alerts, and the number of alerts now going out to the public has increased exponentially. There are always some guiding principles that we continue to observe, and we are continually thinking about how best to balance the integrity of the investigation against public safety. One remaining concern that has also prevailed is our concern not to overwhelm the public with alerts, which may serve to undermine their effectiveness and not to create an atmosphere or perception of undue fear. The other critical component is making sure that we have the right information, and during the initial investigative phase that is not always as straight forward as one would think. These last few issues have been the most challenging to us in an effort to get it right.

Currently the department uses the following guidelines in assessing the appropriateness of sending out community alerts. It remains the central philosophy of the department to alert the public to serious offenses that may jeopardize the public's safety within the city's neighborhoods. As a result, the public may benefit from the release of that information as long as it does not unduly compromise the criminal investigation, unless of course public safety overshadows the need to preserve the investigation, or the confidentiality of witnesses and victims.

In terms of the guidelines we are currently following, community alerts are distributed citywide or to the affected neighborhood(s) providing that there is no compromise to the investigation when:

1. There has been a pattern of serious crime in a neighborhood and there is reason to believe that citizens can assist by taking measures to prevent any further crime of this type.
2. The Commanding Officer of the Investigations Section and Director of Communications determine that citizens in the affected neighborhood will be safer if they were aware of a recent crime(s) and/or arrest of a suspect(s).
3. The Commanding Officer of the Investigations Section and Director of Communications determine that the assistance of the community is helpful in identifying the perpetrator(s) of the crime(s).

4. When members of the community request specific information about a crime be released, in order to be able to protect themselves and provide investigative information, this request will be directed to the Neighborhood Coordinator who will coordinate the release of the information with the Investigations Section and the Director of Communications.
5. There is an event that will affect large portions of the city, such as road closures, snow emergencies, construction, training initiatives, or a state-of-an-emergency.
6. The department will not typically put out an alert concerning sexual assaults when the victim knows the identity of the perpetrator, or when the incident involves a family-related matter.

In addition to more formal community alerts, the Cambridge Police's Twitter account publishes posts about high-profile incidents in real-time 24/7/365 to create further transparency and information with the community. The department also posts its daily journal on-line for public review, along with other web-based tools. This provides a constant source of information without potentially diluting more formal community notifications.

Over the past six months, the department has issued 21 citywide alerts and an additional 30 neighborhood-specific alerts. We are currently experimenting with providing updates relative to community alerts that have been sent out, whenever we have resolved the public safety issue or made an arrest in connection with an alert that was issued. What we have been watching very carefully is when we get requests for individuals who want to unsubscribe, which speaks to our concerns of not over-saturating the community with alerts. The community alerts were never intended to take the place of the media, nor were they ever intended to be put out in the form of breaking news.

I am confident when and why we put out community alerts will continue to evolve as we continue to evaluate and assess the use of these community notifications. I hope that this brief description provides some insights into the deliberative process that takes place each time an incident rises to the consideration of a community alert, and the realization each situation is very much predicated upon a case-by-case assessment.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions or concerns.

Respectfully Submitted,



Robert C. Haas
Police Commissioner