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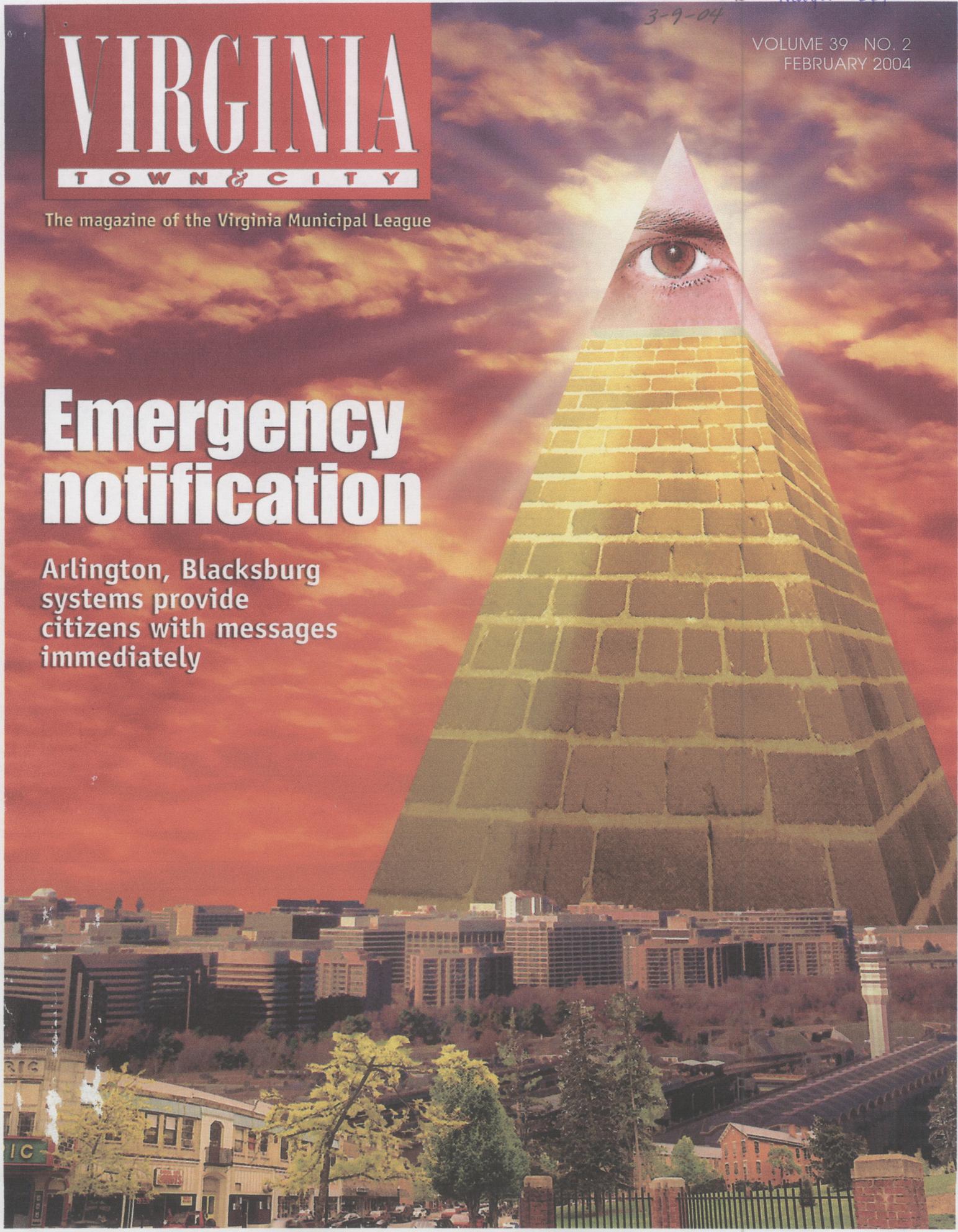
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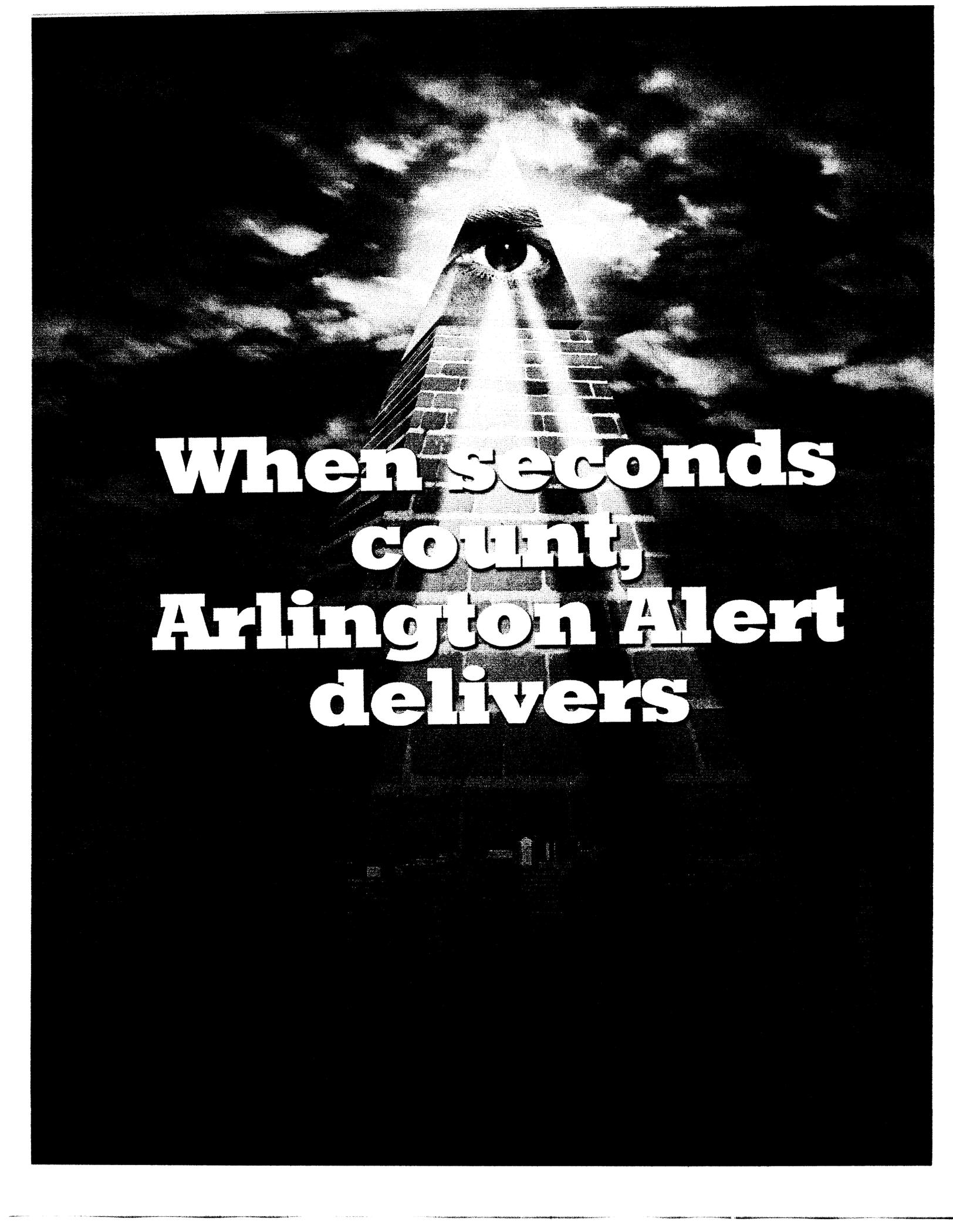
TOWN & CITY

The magazine of the Virginia Municipal League

Emergency notification

Arlington, Blacksburg systems provide citizens with messages immediately





**When seconds
count,
Arlington Alert
delivers**

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Arlington County and the Town of Blacksburg were two of the first local governments in the state to install emergency notification systems that send free, coordinated real-time text messaging to citizens via an assortment of communication devices. Their approaches to implementing this technology are chronicled here.*

WHEN A PLANE CRASHED into the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, worldwide media converged on Arlington County. Although the terrorist attack was an international story about an attack on a federal facility, it fell to Arlington to manage the national and international press corps while trying to communicate with its own residents.

High profile politicians from throughout the region rushed to the scene to be interviewed by the media, leaving Arlingtonians with a dearth of information about the local situation. Yet, in a survey conducted after Hurricane Isabel last fall, 83 percent of respondents said it's "very" or "somewhat" important to receive Arlington-specific information.

In the days following 9/11, Arlington's efforts to keep its residents and the large daytime population of people that work in the county informed "were creative and reasonably successful," according to an after-action report on the county's response. "However, they were ad hoc and not as timely as they could have been," the report said. (*See related story Page 8*)

In a national media market like the Washington region, it's always a challenge to get local information to Arlingtonians. How can county government quickly narrowcast vital emergency information to its residents when seconds count?

The process of answering that question led to the creation of Arlington Alert, a free real-time messaging system that sends messages to subscribers' text-enabled devices — pagers, cell phones, personal digital assistants and e-mail addresses — in seconds. Launched in April, Arlington's system was one of the first

in the Washington, D.C., region to be widely implemented.

Arlington County initially rolled out the system in November 2002 for its first responders and Emergency Management Team members. Five months later, it was expanded to include anyone who lives or works in Arlington. The service currently has more than 6,800 subscribers, and the county continues to encourage residents and those who work in the county to sign up. With a Latino population of almost 20 percent, Arlington Alert also sends messages in Spanish to those who choose that option.

By Charles Taylor

"As a community that was directly affected on 9/11, Arlington takes homeland security seriously," said Jim Schwartz, director of the county's Office of Emergency Management, who served as Arlington's incident commander at the Pentagon. "Arlington Alert continues to be the best way to quickly get vital public safety information to those who live and work in Arlington during any type of emergency."

Arlington Alert is one of the first systems of its kind to be widely deployed in the Washington area. It uses the Roam Secure Alert Network, an emergency communication system used by governments, emergency management agencies and first responders to send emergency alerts, notifications and updates to registered devices. The types of messages that can be sent via Arlington Alert include notifications about emergency shelter locations, available bed space and hours of operation during a crisis, alerts about emergency evacuation routes and messages to activate citizen watch groups in response to police bulletins. The system is hosted and managed in Arlington's state-of-the-art network operations center, ensuring an uninterrupted power source.

The system proved its mettle in September 2003, when the county used it to communicate with residents during Hurricane Isabel. During widespread power outages following the storm, Arlington Alert worked flawlessly, getting out vital informa-

tion about dangerous winds, the declaration of a local emergency, messages about the safety of Arlington's drinking water and even the locations where free ice was being distributed to those without power. In the days following Isabel, sign-ups increased 25 percent.

"The Arlington Alert System was my best source of information during and after the hurricane," said Jim Pebley, chairman of Arlington's Public Emergency Communications Task Group. "I strongly encourage everyone in Arlington to sign up." The alert doesn't end with the recipient, as many subscribers reported passing along the information they received to neighbors and others.

Such is the value of the system, that when the federal government raised the national terrorism alert to Orange on Dec. 21, the Office of Emergency Management began an automated Reverse 911 callout to all published Arlington phone numbers, encouraging those who live and work in the county to sign up for Arlington Alert. The system saw a 20-fold increase in subscribers during the outreach effort compared to the previous two weeks.

"People always see the value of a system like this when an emergency is happening," OEM's Schwartz noted. "Our challenge is to educate the public to sign up before you need it, because then, it might be too late. I truly believe that this system has the potential to save lives.

"As a good a job as they do, we've learned that we can't depend on the media to focus on Arlington when an emergency affects the entire region," he added. "Whether it's a hurricane, a chemical spill on the I-395 or another terrorist attack, Arlington Alert is the best tool we currently have to communicate critical information to our population when seconds count."

CONTACT: To find out more about the Arlington Alert system, contact Jeff Stern at 703/228-0781 or jstern@arlington.va.us.

About the author

Charles Taylor is media relations manager for Arlington County government.



Blacksburg ALERT

Town integrating new emergency communications system into overall plan

SOME HAVE CALLED it an electronic Town Crier. Others say it's the next generation of electronic service technologies since the creation of the Blacksburg Electronic Village in the 1980s. However you dub it, "BlacksburgAlert" is making waves and giving a whole new meaning to government-to-citizen communication.

In September the Town of Blacksburg rolled out an innovative government communication tool called BlacksburgAlert, powered by Tele-Works' FirstResponder™ software.

"Blacksburg's use of the FirstResponder product is very pioneering and unique," said Tele-Works President Chris Schellhammer. FirstResponder was recently awarded the Virginia Innovation in Technology Award that recognized Tele-Works technologies as a significant improvement to how business is done within the homeland security industry.

In essence, BlacksburgAlert is an emergency notification system that sends coordinated information to multiple communication devices simultaneously. Telephone data is provided to the town by local carriers Verizon and NTC Communications and in the event of an emergency, every Blacksburg citizen with a listed landline telephone number is notified. Through a cooperative agreement with neighboring Virginia Tech, the town is also able to communicate quickly with its student population. For those without listed telephone numbers, there is a personalized option that allows citizens to request emergency notices by way of e-mail or other communication device.

"The benefits and the efficiencies of a system like BlacksburgAlert are tremendous," said Community Relations Manager Heather Browning. "In the event of an emergency, we not only have the ability to instantly communicate with our citizenry, but to share information with



the media, other government agencies, volunteer organizations and the like.”

Across the country, Tele-Works is launching the FirstResponder™ technology, but in Blacksburg, officials have taken an innovative emergency notification system and turned it into a communication power tool. BlacksburgAlert has subscriber service that allows users to select specific types of public notifications they'd like to receive and how they'd like to receive them. Through BlacksburgAlert, a single message is automatically translated for e-mail, telephone, fax, TTY, cell phones, and pagers, based on each subscriber's personal preferences. The ability to communicate with all devices in a

single step and to leverage the technology for enhanced community services 24/7 is a unique attribute of BlacksburgAlert.

Since September, the number of BlacksburgAlert subscribers has grown by leaps and bounds and exceeded every town expectation. Citizens are signing up to receive notices about transit service, parks and recreation, public safety, public meetings, community events, online services, traffic events, trash and recycling, and Friday afternoon eNews. As the system evolves, the town has plans to tie BlacksburgAlert into its GIS system to allow for more flexibility in information distribution.

“In Blacksburg we operate under the premise that information sharing

and providing for an informed citizenry is just as much a municipal service as any other,” Browning said. “BlacksburgAlert allows us to demonstrate that commitment, and to cater the service of information distribution to our citizen's needs.”

While BlacksburgAlert provides the instant ability to notify the citizens of Blacksburg of an emergency, the town has, and will continue, to integrate the system into its own network of internal communication.



Contact: To find out more about the BlacksburgAlert system, contact Heather Browning at 540/961-1199 or hbrowning@blacksburg.gov.



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