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City studies proper use of its reverse 911 system

Issues weigh privacy against public safety

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The city of Louisville is pondering the proper use of its reverse 911 system, weighing questions of privacy vs. public safety.

Reverse 911 allows Louisville

and Jefferson County's Emergency Management Agency to pick a part of town, then dial every phone number in that area with a prerecorded message.

Next month, Alderman Steve Magre wants the city to come up with criteria on how to use the system, which the city received in January.

Several questions regarding the system need to be addressed:

■ Should mass calls go out to unlisted phone numbers or to people who don't want to be on

a reverse 911 list?

■ Should the city call to locate missing children and inform communities of door-to-door scam artists, or reserve the system for the most severe emergencies?

■ How will people know whether a message is legitimate and not a hoax?

"The community needs to know we have this, and it's waiting so they're not totally surprised or put back if they get such a phone call," Magre said.

Dick Bartlett, director of

emergency management, said the agency has been learning about the new reverse 911 system and is addressing the types of questions Magre has posed.

"We've found there's so much we can do with this system," Bartlett said.

The agency used the system this week to call members of the crisis-management group — representatives from emergency services such as the health and fire departments — about a meeting, Bartlett said. The system also can be used to send information to customized lists

of recipients.

To check whether a reverse 911 call is legitimate, individuals might be able to call City-call, Louisville's information line, he said.

Several local industrial companies bought the system for the city after being involved in the city's Risk Management Program in January 2000. The companies thought the system would be a good investment if an industrial accident were to occur, Bartlett said.

Lexington bought a computer

program similar to Louisville's reverse 911 in the fall of 2000, said Julie Smoak, an environmental services administrative specialist for Lexington's urban-county government.

They used the system in late May to contact companies in an industrial part of town when pollution was flowing into a creek, she said.

Although the source of the pollution wasn't found, Smoak said she believes Lexington's reverse 911 system will serve many uses, from alerting city

employees to storm warnings to helping the police solve crimes or find missing persons.

The only problem with Lexington's system, she said, is that it took three hours to call 1,000 phone numbers during the pollution incident.

"There are limitations — it's not a panacea," Bartlett admits.

Bartlett said the system will complement, not replace, Louisville's emergency notification system, which consists of sirens and the emergency alert system on television and radio.