

Town of Sharon, Massachusetts Connects with Residents through a “Community” Radio

When the City of Miramar decided to implement an information-based system to communicate to residents, they began investigating radio frequencies to broadcast their messages. They were aware of another local community that used Highway Advisory Radio (HAR) to broadcast messages about city events as well as parks and recreational activities. The challenge for the City of Miramar, however, was to find a system that could broadcast messages throughout the entire city, not just in a localized area such as a park or only one section of the city.

The Town of Sharon, Massachusetts, is a “postcard” New England town with tree-lined streets and a Post Office Square. This quaint, yet thriving community of approximately 18,000 residents is located midway between Boston and Providence, Rhode Island, and home to busy professionals, local business owners and active community citizens.

The Town of Sharon knows that “community” means something real to its residents, as is evident by its network of civic volunteers, commitment to keep residents safe, and emphasis on communications to residents. In order to better meet residents’ informational needs, keep them connected to community events and provide information and instructions during emergencies, the Town of Sharon recently implemented a community advisory radio system from Vaisala, Inc.

Recent Disasters Prompt Action

A community radio system is something the Town of Sharon had been thinking about for many years, according to Mike Polimer, Director of Civil Defense. But the effort was heightened by the hurricane Katrina disaster of a couple of years ago.

“[Our system] was purchased specifically for the large regional disaster – power outages, downed phone lines, winter weather and resulting inability to communicate with the residents of the town,” Mr. Polimer explains.

The Town of Sharon contacted Vaisala, Inc. to learn more about HIS Highway Advisory Radio systems that the company offers. A Highway Advisory Radio, or HAR, system is a low-power radio station used to notify motorists of traffic conditions, events, local points of interest or emergency information. The Vaisala HIS Highway Advisory Radio was designed for use for our transportation system, but also works for local municipalities to communicate with their residents. After meeting with Vaisala and learning more about HIS Highway Advisory Radio, the Town of Sharon implemented its system.

“In the South, after a hurricane for example, people can survive much longer without adequate shelter,” Mr. Polimer says. “Up here, after a winter ice storm with temperatures below freezing, residents often must be moved to someplace warm immediately, and communication with residents is critical to saving lives.” Polimer adds that “similarly, in Florida, and along the Gulf Coast, residents have a lot of practice responding to emergencies; likewise in the tornado belts across the Midwest. Residents in those locations are accustomed to turning on emergency radio, but the Town of Sharon requires a different approach to keep residents connected.”

It also isn’t enough to merely have a community/emergency radio system in place if no one knows it exists. So the Town of Sharon actively trains its residents to use the system by supplying useful information on a daily basis. This way, if an emergency does occur, people will naturally turn to the radio station for information.

“On a day-to-day basis we have messages of community interest from many town departments,” says Chuck Levine, Training Officer for the town’s Civil Defense Department. “Some messages announce specific events such as town meetings and flu clinics. Some messages stay on for months at a time (seasonal, dealing with snow or the lake in town) and others have been there from the start, like the Fire Department emergency and general business phone numbers and a general ‘welcome’ message.”

In addition, Sharon has erected informational signs at each major entry point into town. Currently it has about 12 messages on the radio, each from a different department or organization.

The Town of Sharon’s HIS Highway Advisory Radio system is a fixed system with the electronics located in the Civil Defense EOC (Emergency Operation Center). The electronics are remote from the antenna, and emergency power is provided by an auto changeover, natural gas generator with a small battery, which keeps messages on the air for 60 seconds while the electricity is out and power is being transferred over to the generator.

A Unique Approach

The Town of Sharon’s radio system is unique because of its two-phase operation, volunteer participation and non-standard message control. The HIS Highway Advisory Radio is beneficial for the residents because it provides both day-to-day and emergency announcements. The two-phased operation works in the following way: in the event of an emergency, such as a winter storm, hurricane or HAZMAT problem, the Town of Sharon switches the standard messages off and broadcasts emergency messages as needed. When the emergency is over the radio is switched back to daily operation mode.

The community radio system is run entirely by the Sharon Civil Defense Department. Civil Defense members have “day jobs” that take up most of their time, so the procedures for managing the radio and its messages have to be accomplished using a minimum amount of volunteer time. After a short training session, a volunteer can record, change or delete desired messages on the radio without assistance from city employees. Some of the messages are recorded by paid employees of the Town, such as fire, health and/or police, but many other messages are put on and maintained by volunteers in organizations such as youth baseball and other sports organizations, the Independence Day celebration committee, Senior Center, MRC and other volunteer organizations.

And while most radio users control messages from a central point or office, the Town of Sharon has turned message control over to the users. This approach makes accessing the system more convenient for the user and allows them to alter messages quickly from their individual locations.

A Role Model for Other Communities

The experience the Town of Sharon has had with its HIS Highway Advisory Radio provides the opportunity to give advice to other communities wanting to undertake such an effort. First, according to Mr. Polimer, is explaining that it takes the cooperation of all other departments and organizations within a given town, especially if they are volunteers. “Without cooperation, the system simply will not work. I am proud of our town and the way the LEPC, civil defense and all town departments have worked together to make our project a success. Without the help of the Board of Selectmen, Fire Chief and Police Chief we would have never succeeded.”

Secondly, the Town of Sharon strongly promotes “marketing” of its system. The Northeast, including the Town of Sharon, does not have as many emergencies as the hurricane-prone East Coast, earthquake-

riddled West Coast or tornado-prevalent Midwest. To combat unfamiliarity with such a communications system, the Town of Sharon put up signs, supplied residents with bumper stickers and advertised the station.

“The model we suggest other towns copy is to get the population in the habit of listening every day for information so that they naturally turn to the station during emergencies,” Polimer says. “We have heard about other towns that have purchased emergency radio systems and broadcast the same messages month after month. No one listens and very few people in town even know that such a system exists. In case of an emergency, no one will know about the station and any emergency information just will not be heard.”

Finally, Polimer says that the station cannot simply be installed and forgotten. The project takes continuous work; not technical work, but work with the users to ensure that messages are changed often and that the station is constantly used. The primary audience of the system is not motorists, but residents at home looking for daily town information or emergency information on shelters, road closures, etc. Levine concludes: “Actually, we were told that some of the residents in our senior housing like the station because in each message rotation we announce the day, date and time, and they find this very useful.”