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The Civil Grand Jury asks for residents, visitors, emergency services and policy makers to understand the history, purpose and opportunity for the Outdoor Public Warning System (the Sirens).

SAN FRANCISCO, June 16, 2026 – San Francisco's outdoor warning sirens have been silent since December 2019. Should the system be restored? In a new report, **The Sounds of Silence**, the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury reviewed the history of the sirens, and their applicability to San Francisco's overall strategy to deliver urgent information to residents and visitors.

Since the Outdoor Public Warning System (OPWS) was decommissioned, there have been initiatives to reactivate the system, but those initiatives have so far failed to achieve coordinated commitment from the Mayor's Office, the Board of Supervisors (BoS) and implementing departments, principally the Department of Emergency Management (DEM). That non-decision has a cost, and the Department of Emergency Management is paying for it.

The siren system originated during World War II as an air-raid warning for a civilian population that was smaller, predominately English-speaking, and more likely to be outdoors. In addition, the number of daily visitors and commuters was smaller than in recent years. Today San Francisco has a different set of threats, serves a different population, and operates in a different built environment. Even when the modernized OPWS was operational from 2005 to 2019, it was activated only once for an actual emergency to warn of unsafe drinking water on Treasure Island.

The system has been offline since 2019 because of documented security vulnerabilities and aging hardware. Several installations have been removed because dilapidated hardware was in danger of falling and causing injury. Proposals to restore the system were formally solicited in 2020. A full restoration of the system at that time was estimated to cost about 20 million dollars, although there were opportunities to save money by limiting the extent of the restoration. While the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors have made requests and resolutions to restore some or all of the OPWS, there has been no commitment of necessary resources to the project.

This ambivalence, in itself, is a problem that has consequences for emergency preparedness. DEM fields recurring media inquiries, responds to Board resolutions, and manages procurement processes for a system that remains unfunded. That effort competes directly with operational priorities that DEM's own leadership identifies as more urgent, including expanded Watch Center coverage, improved message quality, and growth of the City's digital alerting audience.

The Jury recommends that DEM formally advise the Mayor and Board of Supervisors on whether to restore or permanently retire the OPWS, so that elected leadership can make an informed policy decision along with a public commitment. The DEM should make available a clear, up-to-date explanation of San Francisco's emergency alerting strategy. Remnant siren hardware that presents a physical hazard should be removed, and one installation should be preserved as a public safety monument. DEM does difficult work with limited resources. Closing the siren question frees the department to focus its full attention on the systems and practices that directly protect residents and visitors every day.

The Civil Grand Jury report **The Sounds of Silence** may be viewed online at https://www.sf.gov/resource--2026--civil-grand-jury-reports-2025-2026.

About the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury
The Superior Court selects 19 San Franciscans to serve year-long terms as Civil Grand Jurors. The Jury has the authority to investigate City and County government by reviewing documents and interviewing public officials and private individuals. At the end of its inquiries, the Jury issues reports on its findings and recommendations. City and County agencies identified in the report must respond to these findings and recommendations. The Board of Supervisors conducts a public hearing on each Civil Grand Jury report.

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