Council members adopt ordinance eliminating city's public storm shelters

By Jay Hampton
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NORMAN — Norman residents have about six months to develop and practice plans to take shelter before tornado season returns.

Norman City Council members adopted an ordinance Tuesday officially eliminating the city's designated public storm shelters. The shelters were at schools and city recreation centers and were not tornado safe by FEMA standards.

"The schools (where people were sheltering) are no safer than the average residential structure," Norman Fire Chief James Fullingim said.

Fullingim said opening the shelters gives people a false sense of security. It also means people may be on the road when a tornado hits.

The Norman Fire Department, the Red Cross and the Central Region of the Oklahoma Emergency Management Association recommend sheltering in place as a best practice.

Fullingim said it is key for people to develop a personal and family safety plan for tornadoes and other emergencies and then to practice that plan so all family members are familiar with what to do in an emergency situation.

People should stay informed, Fullingim said. Often, severe storms are predicted several days out. While meteorologists are not able to predict the exact path of a tornado three days in advance, large, dangerous storms are often predicted to hit an area days ahead of time.

If a storm is predicted, people should stay tuned into weather channels and weather radio and prepare to take cover.

Fullingim said the average lead time on a tornado is 15 minutes, but it can be less than two minutes.

He said while public shelters may work in a small community where everyone is within an eight-minute walking distance, for a city Norman's size, public shelters are not practical.

This spring, people were standing outside of the public storm shelter because there were more people than there was space inside, he said. On May 31, people across central Oklahoma panicked and left their homes rather than sheltering in place.

"People who died on the 31st were people who were in their cars," Fullingim said. "We don't have enough places to hold 115,000 people in close proximity to their homes. The last place you want to be is in your car when a storm hits."

Families can identify an interior room or closet or plan to shelter with a neighbor. Fullingim said it is a good idea to wear a bicycle, motorcycle or other helmet to protect your head if you are not in a tornado-safe shelter. Shoes also are important to protect feet from glass and debris after the storm has passed.

The city has issued a high number of residential storm shelter permits since the May tornadoes, indicating that many people
are taking responsibility for their safety.

In other city business, City Manager Steve Lewis said three months into the budget, the city is running on track. While expenditures are slightly ahead of revenue, that is normal because some of those expenditures come right after the start of the fiscal year on July 1.

Residential water revenue is well behind last year because of the rain in August compared to drought and high temperatures last August. However, there have been fewer emergency water purchases from Oklahoma City, which means that expense is down. The only purchase that has been made from Oklahoma City this year was due to a break in a water main.

Last year, residential water use was inordinately high because of the drought and heat. While those high sales put a strain on equipment and supply, it was a boost to revenue.

Money continues to come in supporting the addition of a cat porch for the new Norman Animal Shelter being built.

The funds have been donated in memory of Sara Maisano.

While many gifts of varying sizes have been donated, council members must approve any gift of $250 or more.

During the second round of gifts Tuesday, city council members approved $7,125 in animal shelter donations, including:

- $250 from Sooner Veterinarian Hospital
- $250 from Denise Swarowsky
- $300 from Belinda Sneed
- $325 from Danielle Brown
- $500 from Lynn Rose
- $500 from Barrett Williamson Architects Inc.
- $5,000 from an anonymous donor

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