

TO: COUNTY LEGISLATURE  
FROM: JOE MAREANE  
DATE: JULY 3, 2017  
RE: PROPOSED MASS NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

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Background: Tompkins County has experienced a number of weather-related and other emergencies when it was important to relay timely and updated information to the community and/or specific individuals. With no single method in place to notify people all at once, County staff has used a variety of means—from phone trees to press releases—to get the word out to as many people as possible. The same is true for other local governments within the County.

In the interest of speed, efficiency, and consistency of these critical messages, the Department of Emergency Response began researching commercial alerting/notification systems in 2014, with a goal of being able to notify and update not only public safety agencies and county departments about emergencies, but the public either by neighborhood, municipality or on a countywide basis. In 2015, the idea of a notification system was again discussed by the Post-Climate Survey Steering Committee as a method to improve communications between the County and its employees, as well as between individual County departments and their customers.

In early 2017, the City of Ithaca advised the County that it was pursuing a mass notification system, and invited the County to participate in the review. Both agreed that the Swift911 system offered by the SwiftReach firm, headquartered in Mahwah, New Jersey, was superior to the three others that were reviewed. As the review continued, the benefits of a single, high quality countywide system, accessible to all municipalities within the County, became apparent. The annual cost of a single system is approximately \$6,500 less than multiple municipal systems. Also, the logistics of managing a sophisticated notification system are better handled by a County staff trained in emergency communications. A countywide system can also be included in the County's upcoming Shared Services Plan, with a potential one-time State match of the savings.

The Product: The Swift911 mass notification can send an immediate message via phone, text, email, fax, and social media. The target of the message can be comprehensive, as would be appropriate in a major emergency, or narrowly targeted to subscribers who have a particular need or interest in a particular matter. A message can also be targeted geographically, so that only people who live within a certain distance of a point, or in an area defined on a map, will receive the notification.

The Proposal: It is proposed that the County acquire the Swift911 system and to make it available without cost to all municipalities within the County by granting administrative rights to those governments. The County would support the annual \$20,000 cost of the system (in the first year, there is also a \$500 installation fee). As this will be an ongoing expense, a \$20,000 increase in the DOER target budget is also proposed.