

Proposed Code Amendment: Chapter 4-2 (Alarm Systems)

The Alarm Administration Unit in Development Services Department is committed to improving public safety through advocating for the reduction of police responses to false alarms by administering City Code Chapter 4-2 (Alarm Systems). The Alarm Administration Unit proposes amending the alarm systems regulations, specifically regarding permits for apartment complexes in Chapter 4-2-12 (Permits for a System in an Apartment Complex).

Currently, the code reads:

The owner or property manager of an apartment complex shall obtain a master alarm permit if an alarm system is operated in:

(1) a residential unit on the premises, whether the alarm system is furnished by the owner or property manager or contracted for by an individual tenant; or

(2) a non-residential area of the apartment complex, including a common tenant area, office, storage, or equipment area.

This means that in addition to acquiring individual alarm permits for each non-residential area of an apartment complex (Leasing Office, Maintenance Building, Clubhouse, etc.), the complex must also acquire a Master permit. The Master acts as an umbrella permit for the property. If an alarm activation causes a police dispatch to an unpermitted non-residential building or a tenant's unit, the fee for the first non-permitted response is charged to the Master permit. A permit account is also set up for the individual non-residential building or tenant's unit, and a permit fee is invoiced for that account as well.

The Alarm Administration Unit has encountered several challenges in administering the code as it is currently written.

Challenge 1: Apartment Complexes change the following frequently:

- Ownership – A new account must be created when ownership changes, as the new owners may not accept responsibility for false alarm fees incurred under the old ownership. Alarm calls will often need to be reassigned and fees recalculated from one account to the next, a time-consuming process.
- Management/Office Staff – New management or even a new employee handling the billing may not realize they need to keep a permit for each alarmed location. They believe they've already paid the annual renewal fee and therefore do not pay any subsequent invoices that are issued.
- Names or DBAs – A new account is created when the police are dispatched to a location under a different name than is on record. This is usually the first (and only) indication there has been a name change as most management companies do not notify the Alarm Administration Unit of changes. This causes a duplicate account to be created for a location that already may have one or more accounts.

- Billing information – If the management company or the staff member who handles invoicing changes their contact information and does not inform us, invoices may go unnoticed.

Challenge 2: Accounts are frequently created from the information in an incident report which has been coded as a false alarm.

- The information contained in incident reports is minimal. Many will not indicate the building in which the alarm occurred, and it is difficult to determine where to dispose of the alarm call.
- Reports do not indicate how many alarmed locations are on the complex, so there is initially only one account created when more are required.
- Because separate accounts for the buildings on the complex are often created at different times, permits issued to these accounts will have different expiration dates. This means, for example, that the management company may pay an invoice for the Office permit and a few months later, when they receive the invoice for the Maintenance Building, they may disregard it, believing it has already been paid.
- Often, alarm calls may be dispatched under different names for the same property during the same time period. This often indicates that the alarm company doesn't have updated information and they are dispatching police under duplicate alarm service contracts.

Challenge 3: Duplicate accounts exist for the same complex.

Usually, more than one alarm permit is required for each property. When a complex's name or owner changes, a new account may be created for one building, but not the other(s) because this information doesn't come directly from the complex. In the meantime, alarm calls are coming from the same address under different names. The Alarm Administration Unit strives to be proactive when creating new accounts, but with 40,000+ alarm permits in the City, giving special attention to one address is difficult.

Challenge 4: Police dispatches to unpermitted alarm locations incur substantial fees and penalties.

The inattention to invoices and the confusion regarding alarm permitting on the part of the management companies cause many permits to be revoked. The penalty for a police response to an unpermitted location is \$220 per incident. Once the police have responded to an unpermitted location more than two or three times, the fees can become quite substantial. Currently, there are more than 120 accounts for apartment complexes carrying a balance of over \$500. Most of those permits have been revoked, and there are currently 25 accounts in Collections at the Law Department.

The Alarm Administration Unit proposes amending Chapter 4-2-12 (Permits for a System in an Apartment Complex) to include the following provisions:

- Instead of requiring a separate permit at \$110 for each non-residential alarmed building on the complex, each expiring at different times, complexes would be required to obtain

one Master permit (to be renamed “Principal” permit) for each complex with a fee of \$250 per year.

- This Principal permit would cover every non-residential building with an alarm system on the property.
- The Principal permit would also cover the first false alarm response in a tenant’s unit. The tenant would still be responsible for acquiring a residential permit for subsequent alarm calls.

The code would still allow for three “free” alarm calls per permit. In addition, the Director of Development Services Department would have the authority to waive fees in accordance with department policy.

Staff believe these changes will streamline administrative duties, as well as make the alarm permitting process more transparent for the apartment complex managers. While the total alarm response count on the one Principal permit would increase and could incur false alarm fees at a faster rate, the time and money saved in administration, late fees, and non-permitted response fees should offset those fees. The financial impact to the City is minimal and the benefits would far outweigh any loss in fees collected.