



NEWS

By Christine Granados Standard-Radio Post managing editor

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Chief eyes costs of BESS fire response

The two battery energy storage system (BESS) facilities planned inside Gillespie County will impact the City of Fredericksburg's Fire/ EMS Department economically, professionally and emotionally, according to Fire Chief Lynn Bizzell.

Bizzell gave a report on the potential impacts of a BESS fire response for the city's emergency medical services to the city council on Tuesday.

"We know at this point that these facilities are being proposed," said Bizzell. "This morning, I want to focus on what resources we would utilize from a fire and EMS perspective."

He said the city and county fire EMS budgets would be impacted depending on costs associated with a casualty event and highlighted the need for specialized training and equipment.

He said the protective clothing firefighters would wear if a BESS facility were to ignite would have to be thrown out.

“Due to the product that we get in, there is no real cleaning of that product,” he said. “We’re talking about \$10,000 that essentially has to be thrown away. At this point, there’s no way really to clean it. This is a hazmat event, and the product does get into the bunker gear, and at this point,

BESS

â ¶ A5 there’s no real product out there that can clean our bunker here.”

In addition to the equipment replacement expenses, the city would also face overtime costs and staffing recall.

Once on the scene, firefighters would evaluate the wind direction and speed to determine the evacuation area.

He also said there is a potential for evacuations within the city, depending on the wind.

“When you get a pole fire that’s burning out anywhere, we wait until the electric department comes there, shuts it off, and then we’re able to extinguish it,” Bizzell said. “In these scenarios, it is truly electricity, we have to let it burn completely out. What we would do, from a response perspective, we would come in and protect the areas around it. We would be putting water on the areas around it to keep the other areas from catching on fire.”

An emergency operation center, fire and EMS departments, sheriff, police, emergency management and parks and recreation would be called into help. After local resources have been exceeded, then a call for mutual aid goes out and finally a call goes out for state help.

“We would give mutual aid, depending on the location,” Bizzell said. “An engine crew, our volunteer staffing for our standby units and those who may need to come into the emergency would be utilized. We would also be utilizing our EMS crews on site.”

During the event, trauma centers will need to be set up and in worstcase scenarios, emergency operation centers (EOC) will be fully staffed with city and county personnel on scene, including hazardous materials help from outside.

“Once everything kind of dies down and the situation is under control, then what happens is environmental contractors come in and evaluate the area, from the standpoint of the contamination that may or may not be present,” Bizzell said.

What will wear on the firefighters and crews helping is the fact that the burn down may take a week or two, he said.

“What’s unique about these facilities would be the toxicity of the chemicals that are produced when it burns. It would be the longevity of the situation. If you have to let something burn out, that could be weeks,” Bizzell said. “How long do you have to keep people out of their homes? Who’s going to do the initial environmental impact studies to make sure it’s okay to go back? Because at some point we have to be told when these people can go back. You’ve got environmental concerns that are associated with and things of that nature.”

He said the department is still learning, researching and training for these events. They are getting some practice.

“We currently face this from an electric car perspective, we have had electric cars that have burned here in our county,” he said. “They’re not easy to put out. They will burn until they burn out. We don’t put water on electric cars. Some departments are taking these electric cars and putting them in dumpsters and filling them with water to try to extinguish them. We currently face some of this on a smaller scale.”

The fire department needs more training and is reading everything they can about BESS, he said.

“They’re trying to get as many as 1,000 of these put in the state of Texas over the next several years,” he said. “I’ve heard they have a 9% failure number.”

A plan for the Marshall Springs solar and battery energy storage system planned for roughly five miles north of town would encompass 1,100 total acres. Residents are concerned about noise and potential fire hazards, while fire departments are realizing the safety and budget impact to their operations. The first announced BESS facility was announced for Harper and lies roughly 1,000 feet from the Harper ISD campuses. Locals there have expressed concern for students’ safety, along with potential contamination should a fire occur. Property values could also be affected negatively, residents have expressed to the county commissioners court.