

9/15/2012 LOWELL -- Property owners who were forced by the city to buy new fire-alarm boxes in the last three years from one company have not been required to pay to have the boxes' signals monitored by the city, and the majority of the City Council does not want them to pay for the service in the near future. The City Council voted 5-4 Tuesday night to defeat Mayor Patrick Murphy's motion seeking to force owners of residential buildings with 13 or more units to pay the annual \$275 monitoring fee for the boxes. Murphy's proposal came one meeting after councilors voted unanimously to approve Councilor Rodney Elliott's motion calling on the city administration to report back on how city businesses and property owners forced to buy new fire-alarm boxes from East Coast Security Services of Salem, N.H., could recoup their costs. Elliott's motion came in the wake of The Sun's report about a letter from the Inspector General's Office saying East Coast was charging \$2,475 a box, when it only cost \$1,100 to obtain them. The IG's Office found that practice was not advantageous to the city's citizens and businesses. But Murphy said instead of giving rebates to those who have purchased the radio boxes that connect directly to city dispatch, it is time to make property owners pay up. In speaking on his motion, Murphy emphasized that the property owners forced to buy East Coast boxes make profits on housing residents in the city. "It is the cost of doing business I think to provide for the greatest protection possible for those residents of those particular buildings," Murphy said. Murphy's motion was supported by Councilors Bill Martin, Joseph Mendonca and Vesna Nuon. Voting in opposition were Councilors Elliott, Ed Kennedy, John Leahy, Marty Lorrey and Rita Mercier. Mercier said she could not support a motion saying the city would not reimburse the impacted property owners, and was instead going to start charging them a fee they have not been paying. "I personally feel they were wronged," Mercier said. "I personally feel some reimbursement should be made." Leahy said as a small business owner he feels business owners are already paying enough fees, and he does not support adding to the burden on business owners. "I think we have enough fees and everybody had to replace the fire boxes, so enough is enough for right now," said Leahy, who runs an interior painting company. City Manager Bernie Lynch spoke in support of Murphy's proposal. Lynch highlighted the council voted 8-0 in 2009 for the \$275 fire-alarm monitoring fee. The manager also said since property owners have not had to pay the fee since the fire-alarm monitoring ordinance was approved, "that would in a way be a reimbursement for the people who attached these boxes in accordance with the ordinance." There are 195 East Coast boxes owned by private entities, as well as 33 at UMass Lowell and 13 at the Lowell Housing Authority, according to city officials. Judy Blackburn, the former owner of the River Valley House, has said the city should repay impacted property owners like the Fletcher Street nonprofit the difference between the cost of the alarm boxes they had to purchase and the cost to purchase the same equipment at a lower cost. Presently, both fire and nonfire signals from the wireless East Coast radio boxes are sent to the city's dispatch center. But city officials are seeking to have the city's wireless fire-alarm system reprogrammed so the nonfire signals are diverted elsewhere. A request for proposals, or RFP, issued by the city in recent months seeks a company that will change the alarm system to send nonfire signals sent by the boxes instead to a private, central-station monitoring company. The move is in the works because dispatchers have complained that they don't have time to deal with the nonfire signals they have to acknowledge during the day. "I think it is important the city is addressing non-emergency calls so they don't distract from the real emergency calls," Murphy said.