

# Officials prepare for tornado season

**By Casey Hana**  
staff writer

**A**S DISASTER officials work this week to educate the public about the threat of tornadoes, local officials say lack of local awareness during annual drills associated with Michigan Tornado Safety Week can cause safety problems.

Each year when the Oakland County Emergency Management Division tests its 187 sirens, both the Farmington Hills and Farmington police and fire officials are deluged

with calls inquiring about the "emergency."

The calls have gotten so bad that switchboards become overloaded and true emergency calls cannot be made or received at the stations, officials from both cities said.

They are asking residents not to call unless a true emergency exists. "Residents are requested not to call the police and fire departments," said Police Capt. Russ Conway, disaster coordinator for Farmington Hills. Commander Michael Wiggins, fire marshal for the Farmington Department of Public Safety, concurred.

**THIS YEAR'S** siren test will be held Thursday at 1 p.m. It will involve the 10 sirens in Farmington Hills, the two in Farmington and others throughout the county. Police and fire officials will check each siren and report any problems to Oakland County.

The steady, three-minute siren tone signifying a tornado warning — which means a tornado has been sighted — will be used for the Thursday drill. Sirens are not sounded when there is a tornado watch — when conditions exist for the development of a tornado.

Sirens are also routinely tested on the first Saturday of each month at 1 p.m.

County officials are suggesting businesses, families and others use the Thursday test to "take advantage of the opportunity" to "test your internal tornado plans."

Most of the reported tornadoes in Michigan have been in the southeast area, according to Wiggins. Since 1950, more than 522 tornadoes have occurred in the state.

"A lot of people enjoy studying tornadoes," he said. "They (the tornadoes) don't act rationally."

**DESPITE THEIR** erratic behavior, there are some specific patterns with tornadoes and funnel clouds, however. Most occur during the late afternoon hours and move from the southwest to the northeast, which leaves the Farmington area in a vulnerable position, Wiggins and Conway said.

A siren sounding in Oakland County may mean one has been sighted on the north side — which leaves this area relatively safe. "The siren sound doesn't necessarily mean the tornado is here," Conway said. "When they're activated, they all go off" around the county.

But Farmington and Farmington Hills sit in the southwest corner of Oakland County — the first path a tornado would take if coming directly from Washtenaw County, Wiggins said. Officials suggest residents monitor television and radio broadcasts and be aware of any tornado sightings in either Washtenaw and Livingston counties, which could head in this direction quickly.

If a tornado is sighted in the southwest part of Oakland County and sirens are sounded, it is important to

take action immediately, because the 100-300-mile-per-hour winds could hit immediately, Wiggins added. He said he is not aware of any joint venture between counties to help border communities such as Farmington and Farmington Hills.

AS AN added part of tornado safety week, Oakland County's Paul Phelps, manager of the Emergency Management Division, reminds local communities his department is available for speaking engagements on tornado safety and is always ready to provide advice where needed.

In addition, the county is training volunteers this week to be part of the Skywarn network of spotters. These volunteers monitor weather conditions from their cars in various parts of the county, and alert disaster officials when a tornado is spotted.

Further information can be obtained by calling the Emergency Management Division at 858-5300.

## Twisters

### Tips for safe tornado months

An average of 17 people each year are killed by tornadoes in Michigan. Property loss has been estimated to be in the millions of dollars.

The Michigan Department of State Police Emergency Management Division has compiled the following tornado facts:

- Tornadoes occur at any time in almost any month. But most occur in April, May, June and July, in the late afternoon and evening hours, usually between 3 and 7 p.m. when the temperature is 70-75 degrees with high humidity.
- Tornadoes usually come from the southwest at 20-45 mph. Almost all come from the western horizon and have traveled at speeds nearing 70 mph.
- The typical tornado is on the ground less than 10 minutes and travels a distance of five miles. But tornadoes have stayed on the ground for more than three hours and have traveled more than 300 miles.
- The width of a tornado as it touches the ground averages 300-400 yards but may be wider — up to one mile across.
- Tornadoes usually turn counter-clockwise, with wind speeds varying from less than 100 mph to nearly 300 mph.
- Tornadoes develop from dark thunderstorm-like clouds. Research indicates many occur toward the end

of the storm cloud.

- Tornadoes developing from early storms tend to be the most severe.

**A TORNADO** or severe thunderstorm watch is issued by the National Severe Storm Center in Kansas City when conditions exist for severe weather to develop. Watches are two to six hours long, giving you time to plan and prepare by:

- Placing small objects, which could become deadly missiles, inside — away from the wind.
- Making sure everyone knows what to do if a tornado is sighted. Children should be closely supervised.

A tornado or severe thunderstorm warning is issued by the National Weather Service when a tornado or severe thunderstorm has been sighted or is strongly indicated by radar. Warnings usually last no longer than 30 minutes and are designed to give time to seek shelter immediately.

**WHAT CONSTITUTES** shelter?

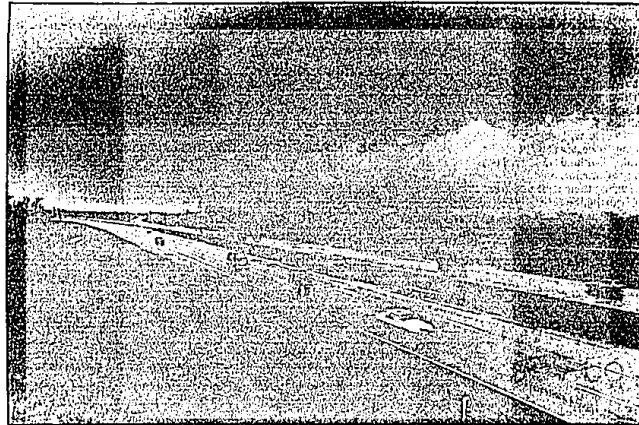
- Houses — a basement offers the greatest safety. Seek shelter under sturdy furniture or under the stairs, away from under the kitchen, if possible. In houses without basements, take cover in the center of the house on the lowest floor in a small room, such as a closet or bath-

room, or under sturdy furniture. If you have time, open a window.

- Mobile homes — during warnings, go to a prearranged, substantial shelter.
- Driving a car — travel at right angles to the tornado's path. If there isn't time to drive away from it, get out of the car and into a basement, ditch or ravine, away from the car. If outside, lie flat in the nearest depression and use your hands to shield your head.
- At work or at school — follow advance plans to move to interior hallways or small rooms on the lowest floor. Avoid areas with glass and wide, free-span roofs.
- In open country — get into a sturdy building, or on the ground, if possible.

**WHAT IF** your house is struck?

- Do your best to protect yourself, your family and your neighbors from further damage.
- Make certain authorities are notified you are a tornado victim.
- Photograph or otherwise document the damage to your property and injuries to your family.
- Cooperate with authorized officers and volunteers who arrive.
- Do not sign contracts for repair work, removal of rubble or additional insurance without consulting authorities.
- Do not go to the tornado scene.



Tornadoes develop from dark, thunderstorm-like clouds, such as these moving over I-808 in Farmington Hills.

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