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City not likely to hit October goal for data hack recovery

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It appears unlikely Columbus will have all its computer systems restored by the end of this month, a target Mayor Andrew Ginther had expressed hope for at the end of September.

The recovery continues to be slow after a devastating ransomware attack on the city's computer systems discovered in July ultimately led the hacker to leak citizens' personal information on the dark web when the city refused to pay.

Since Columbus City Council last met two weeks ago, the city chief technology officer Sam Orth reported to the council on Monday that five more systems have been restored, bringing the total restored systems to 74%.

That is only 1% higher than Orth's last report to council. More than 100 of the city's 474 computer systems are still not functioning, Councilmember Nick Bankston, chair of the council's finance and governance committee, asked Orth if the city would reach its self-imposed goal of being fully operational by the end of October.

"As you indicated, it is an ongoing and moving target," Orth said.

The city is focused on restoring the internet, Orth said, but he couldn't say when that would be restored for all city offices.

Orth said that the city has restored all of the most critical systems that are used the most often.

"The ones that are remaining are the less-used systems at this point. That doesn't mean that they're not important," he added.

Sign up for free credit monitoring

Not as many people as expected have taken up the city on its offer of free credit monitoring made in the wake of the release of personal information. About 16,500 have signed up, according to Orth.

City residents and anyone who has provided their name or information to the city, including the Franklin County Municipal Court, are eligible for two years of free credit

monitoring via Experian. You must sign up by Nov. 29. To sign up, you can visit www.columbus.gov/cyber or by calling [1-833-9185161](tel:1-833-9185161) with the code B129832 or B129988 for anyone under 18.

Tax incentives continue as most companies make good on promises

In other business, City Council voted unanimously to approve the continuation of 117 tax incentive agreements with local businesses and companies. Only six agreements that expired were not renewed.

These agreements involve tax abatements on properties for a certain number of years in exchange for companies investing in building and hiring or retaining workers.

The Tax Incentive Review Council made its annual recommendations based on what businesses reported in 2023. According to the report, the majority of companies fulfilled their part of the agreements and required no followup.

In 14 agreements, companies were found out of compliance with their agreements, often because they had not created as many jobs as they promised, but the Tax Incentive Review Council recommended that Columbus City Council keep the agreements. Organizations will be sent letters outlining how to come into compliance or their tax incentive will be terminated in 2025.

Some of those companies are being allowed to amend their agreements to reduce the number of jobs they have to create or retain. For example, Huntington Bank has a 75% 10-year tax abatement on an office building on Cleveland Avenue on the Northeast Side. Instead of netting 23 new jobs and retaining 1,179 jobs as planned, 829 retained jobs were reported. The Tax Incentive Review Council recommended continuing the tax abatement but reaching an agreement with Huntington about “right sizing the retained job number for a post-Covid hybrid work environment.”

Overall, job retention last year was 120% of goal for these agreements, and 6,368 new jobs were created.

“It shows that these investments are working,” Bankston said. He said this process holds organizations accountable after accepting city tax incentives.

City reinvests in code violation repair program

Also Monday, the City Council unanimously approved an additional \$500,000 for an existing program that assists elderly and disabled homeowners with repairing code violations at their homes so they can remain in their homes.

The program contracts with Next Generation Corp. and Habitat for Humanity.

Habitat for Humanity Mid Ohio President and CEO Brandi Braun AL-Issa said it's just as important now to keep people in their homes as it is to build new homes given the housing shortage in Columbus and central Ohio. jlaird@dispatch.com
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