City to explore options to protect against future website attacks

By ROGER MCKINNEY

Friday, January 2, 2015 at 2:00 pm Comments (5)

The cyberattack that shut down Columbia’s municipal website on Christmas Eve has the city looking at its options for defending against potential future attacks, said Deputy City Manager Tony St. Romaine.

The city website, gocolumbiamo.com, experienced a distributed denial of service attack, or DDoS, beginning around 11 p.m. Dec. 24. The website was flooded with requests from multiple computers, St. Romaine said. It remained offline until around noon Dec. 27.

The KOMU website also was hit, but it didn’t experience as much downtime.

St. Romaine said it’s not possible to prevent a DDoS attack from happening, but there are ways to mitigate it, at a price.

He said all who worked to correct the situation last week were salaried employees, so there was no cost involved in the outage. He said it was an inconvenience to those wanting to visit the website, which includes city documents, bill-paying options and other functions.

St. Romaine said voluntarily taking the website down and inconveniencing people as opposed to using taxpayer money for a service to ensure the site remains operational is a trade-off city officials must consider carefully.

“It’s different from a corporate entity that depends on its website,” St. Romaine said. “A city has to weigh the inconvenience to our customers against the cost.”

St. Romaine said there are services that guarantee to keep websites operating. The annual cost estimates have been in the $50,000 to $100,000 range.

Prasad Calyam, assistant professor of computer science at the University of Missouri, said the city used the simplest and cheapest method for protecting its site by taking it offline. “You might have to wait for the attack to go away,” he said. “You’re pretty helpless to try to stop it.”

Calyam said many companies are turning to cloud solutions for website hosting, and those include content delivery networks. A content delivery network also can improve access speed when a website is not being attacked, he said.

“More and more people are using the cloud” to protect websites, Calyam said. He said the cost for the services can depend on the size and demands on a website.

St. Romaine said content delivery networks are among the options the city is considering.