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4 Fire Departments Go Back To Old 911 Radios At Fires

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Pennsylvania - Firefighters from three southwestern York County fire departments will stop using the county's new \$36 million radio network at fire scenes because of reliability concerns. Firefighters from Hanover and from West Manheim and Penn townships will instead rely on radios tied into the county's old analog network, said Hanover Fire Commissioner James Roth.

Jefferson Fire Co., meanwhile, plans to stop using the new radios at fires where firefighters must be sent inside a building, said Chief Troy Snyder.

The decision to revert to the old radios at incidents was made Tuesday by Snyder, Roth, Penn Township Fire Chief Jan Cromer and Pleasant Hill Volunteer Fire Co. Chief Ted Clouser.

They are concerned for the safety of their firefighters, Roth said.

The affected fire departments will begin using the new system at incidents once their concerns are addressed, Roth said. "We are hoping the county will make progress in getting their system up to speed," Roth said.

Switch: Fire department and ambulance personnel switched to the new 911 system late last month. It is part of an estimated \$67.8 million 911 project that also includes a new 911 center in Springettsbury Township.

While many fire officials are generally pleased with the new network, fire officials in southwestern York County have reported continuing problems.

Complaints include temporary blackouts when the system appears to malfunction, big gaps in coverage and unreliable communication between firefighters

at incidents.

Roth said his rank-and-file personnel will carry portable radios tied into the new network most of the time for day-to-day communications.

Fire vehicles will be stocked with radios tied into the old network for use at incidents, Roth said. Incident commanders will still have to use the new network to communicate with 911 dispatchers.

Cromer said he had no problem deciding to revert to the old radios at fire calls.

"It was a pretty easy decision," he said. "Our previous system for us certainly was working better for us than the new one."

He hopes the county quickly resolves the problems, he said.

Defense: Eric Bistline, who is heading the 911 project for the county, could not be reached for comment.

But he has said the new system is meeting or exceeding coverage expectations and that testing results in southwestern York County have been satisfactory. Nonetheless, Bistline has said the county is looking at whether it can improve paging and radio performance in Hanover and the surrounding area.

One option for firefighters to remedy the problem at incidents is to change settings so that they don't have to rely on the new network towers to transmit signals, Bistline has said. The signal would instead transmit directly from one portable radio to another.

Roth said that might be one solution, but the process at the moment is too cumbersome. The radios need to be reprogrammed to make the switch easier.

York County Commissioner Doug Hoke said he has fielded complaints from fire officials in southwestern York County and directed Bistline to send technicians to review the problems.

"We paid a lot of money for the system, and they (the radios) need to work," he said.

Written by The York Dispatch

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