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Replacing CREST would cost millions

Telus is pitching a \$5-million system; officials are looking at \$6-10 million to fix present setup

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It will cost almost as much to build a new emergency radio system for Victoria police as it will to fix the existing, troubled CREST communications system, say officials.

Telus Corp.'s proposed new radio service for Victoria police -- who have been unhappy with spotty reception on their CREST radios for years -- would cost approximately \$5 million, said Victoria Coun. Dean Fortin, the city's representative on the CREST board of directors.

The money would buy new equipment, build additional Telus cellphone towers and guarantee a radio reception rate of 97 per cent in Victoria's downtown core within three months, said Fortin.

The city's downtown is where CREST radios frequently fail to work, on streets, in buildings and even in police headquarters. Police no longer patrol alone because they're not confident they could radio for backup in an emergency.

Victoria police are among 36 groups that use CREST radios, including military, fire and ambulance officials. They are all debating whether to spend \$6 million to \$10 million to fix CREST's reception woes. The system cost \$17 million to build in 2003.

Telus made its own pitch to police and city officials on Oct. 1.

The company said it would build new cell towers across Greater Victoria and upgrade the IDen mobile system -- currently used for backup radios by Victoria police -- into a full-fledged emergency radio system, said Shawn Hall, Telus spokesman.

"The current coverage area of our IDen network is as good or better than what CREST currently has," said Hall. Technically, IDen is a digital cellphone network, but Hall said it can be upgraded to an emergency-service standard.

Police in Durham, Ont., use IDen radios. Victoria police Insp. Bob Gehl said officers visited Durham in August to see the system first-hand and reported Durham was satisfied.

CREST officials have long questioned whether Telus radios could communicate with CREST radios. But Telus insists the two could be made "interoperable" using a central console with technology similar to its disaster-response emergency satellite trucks.

Even if Victoria police choose to build their own Telus system, the city is obligated to pay millions for upgrades as part of its share for initially agreeing

to participate in CREST, said Fortin.

CREST's board of directors will hold a private meeting Oct. 31 where Motorola, the company that built the CREST system, is expected to provide detailed cost estimates for fixing it. All user groups, including Victoria, have agreed to at least negotiate with Motorola.

But even if CREST's board likes the proposal, it is unable to sign a contract or spend money until it gets the City of Victoria's support on a new governance and cost-sharing agreement.

Victoria was the only user group to refuse those changes on Sept. 4, saying it wanted 30 more days to negotiate with Telus. CREST's board needs unanimous approval.

Victoria is waiting to hear Motorola's pitch so it can compare it to Telus's, said Fortin.

CREST chairman Hy Freedman said he doesn't know what Victoria is doing. "We've been working on the City of Victoria for months now, and I don't have an indication from them when they'll agree," he said.

In the meantime, Freedman has promised a number of concessions in exchange for Victoria's support.

In a letter to Victoria city council last week, Freedman offered a one-time cheque for \$25,000 to help pay for the IDen backup radio system, which Victoria police have been using for more than a year. CREST had previously refused to share the costs.

As well, CREST has promised it will not pay Motorola for any upgrades until a third party confirms 97 per cent radio coverage in Victoria's downtown core.

CREST has also promised it will allow users groups, such as Victoria police, to return surplus radios and reduce the amount they are billed by CREST.

Fortin said Victoria council will discuss the offers. The next public CREST meeting is scheduled for the end of November.

If CREST gets Victoria's support, it could require Motorola to finish the upgrades by June 2008, said Freedman.

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