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Reliability of \$2.1B statewide communication system in doubt

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At \$2.1 billion, the state's long-planned single wireless communication system that is supposed to allow firefighters, police and other first responders to speak with one another is the priciest such technology contract in the country.

Yet even at this late date, two months before the drop-dead date to prove this system is operational, there's substantial doubt that it works reliably.

And reliability, for the State Police, for firefighters going into a building, for police in the field, is crucial.

Interim fire and police tests of the system, devised over years by the contractor M/A-Com and the state Office of Technology, have been far short of successful. Trials last summer and fall in rural Chautauqua County went acceptably, but in more crowded Erie County, communication was at best haphazard. Buffalo Fire Commissioner Michael Lombardo, for example, said radios failed to work in about half the city. The public safety unions and the Buffalo police commissioner have expressed no confidence in the system.

Erie County was so put off by the test results, and by the projected \$36 million cost to be a full partner in the state wireless network, that it backed out last week. The county will go its own way with a \$10.2 million upgrade to existing systems.

So far, though, all this failure is costing the state nothing.

M/A-Com won't get paid anything until the state accepts the system as operational. The final test also will take place in the Chautauqua-Erie neighborhood in the last two weeks of April.

The very real possibility of a repeated failure, leading us to an unbelievably expensive boondoggle should approval slip through anyway, has finally gotten the active attention of the state's higher echelons.

Notably, Michael Balboni, head of the state's homeland security efforts and a sort of statewide public safety commissioner. Now, this is his baby. The statewide wireless network is supposed to link all first responders within the state, but also function as the common medium for homeland security purposes within states.

Across the country, the concept of a national system, great on paper but less so in practice, is in disarray. Systems everywhere are struggling to meet specs set by the federal government, interoperability standards and deadlines. New York's system is already more than a year behind schedule.

"Yes, there is great concern, no question," Balboni said Friday. Oversight of the project by the appropriate legislative committees and his office has been stepped up dramatically, he said.

"We're asking hard questions. We want to know why it didn't work in Erie County. The jury's out on whether we're getting the right answers," said Balboni. Of course, the April tests will tell all.

But will they? A major problem with the contract, which M/A-Com got as a result of former U.S. Senator Alphonse D'Amato lobbying his old friend George Pataki, is that the contractor and the state Office of Technology personnel lines have blurred over the years of working on this. Each has become the other's biggest booster.

The contract calls for the Office of Technology to be the sole judge of the system. This also has Balboni concerned, considering the stakes.

"We're insisting as well on an absolutely neutral, third-party evaluator to verify the system," notes Balboni. The state is now accepting bids for such a third-party judge. The growing number of skeptics and critics will be watching closely who gets that contract, you can be sure.

Meanwhile, in the wings is a pending audit by the state comptroller's office that could tilt a lot of minds. The audit is focusing on the costs to "partners" within the state of M/A-Com's proprietary system, should it work.

Reliable concerns have been raised by the first responder community that the M/A-Com system might somehow technically pass its operational test in April, but prove too costly for municipalities and public safety agencies to participate.

Rendering it a successful failure in terms of an actual usable statewide system. The short of it is, the state wireless network at the moment does not have the confidence of first responders in New York.

If those crucial April tests don't dramatically change opinions, as a practical matter the network is back to square one.

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