



EMERGENCY RESPONSE: Erie County pulls out of state wireless network

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— BUFFALO — After years of waiting and substantial investment, Erie County has pulled out of a deal to be part of the planned statewide wireless network.

The county pulled the plug after getting several negative reviews of the system's performance from area first responders after tests last fall, said Legislator Timothy Kennedy, D-Buffalo.

"The entire public safety community was against our inclusion," Kennedy said. "The Sheriff's Department, Central Police Services, Buffalo police, Buffalo Fire Department and Erie County Fire Advisory Board are all now moving in their own directions."

But the New York State Office of Technology, which is undertaking the project, tells a different story. Karl Felsen, a spokesman for the state office, said the Erie County agencies are making the decision to give up on the system based on an early test conducted before essential components of the system were in place.

"The system isn't operational anywhere," Felsen said. "It's still being built. The last transmission point was just finished a few weeks ago and a series of tests is going on now."

The system's completion will come for Erie County. Only 60 percent coverage of the area during those fall tests sealed the deal for police, fire and paramedic agencies that wanted the system sooner and have grown tired of waiting.

"With the cost, ineffectiveness and time spent, they've had it and they're moving on," Kennedy said.

Free lease?

The agreement was negotiated in April 2005 and gave the NYSOT 3,000 square feet of office space in the Central Police Services building for five years with no rent. That apparent free ride resulted in a resolution passed by the Legislature two weeks ago to get that contract re-examined. But the free space wasn't really free, since the NYSOT paid \$2 million to upgrade the CPS building and its contractor, M/A Com, paid \$500,000 more to do the same, Felsen said.

M/A Com spokesman Steve Greenberg said he couldn't comment in detail on the story, but agreed with NYSOT's cost figures for the improvements.

County Executive Chris Collins' office has looked at the agreement and sees the current deal as a win-win, with a small amount of space being given up for the capabilities offered by the statewide wireless network for big emergencies, said Communications Director Grant Loomis.

Mounting costs

A \$3 billion dollar figure has been circulated for the statewide cost of the system if it were to be implemented in the entire state after tests are completed. That worries those like Kennedy who see failed tests as a harbinger of more problems to come, but if M/A Com hasn't delivered to the high standards put forth in the contract the state isn't obligated to pay. Moreover, the state will be in store for a pretty big pay day if the system isn't up to snuff, Felsen said.

"If the state doesn't feel that M/A Com has delivered on the contract, we can take \$100 million from the contractor," Felsen said. "That money is at our disposal to seize and it's up to the contractor to sue if they want to get back a portion. The burden of proof will be on them."

In addition, the \$36 million cost estimate that had everyone up in arms is the estimate for the price of the build out and maintenance of the entire system in Erie County for 20 years. When figuring out how costly another system would be to install and maintain at this point, that long-term maintenance is an important concern, Felsen said.

"If they build their own system, how many hundreds of thousands of dollars would the spend each year to maintain it?" Felsen asked. "People usually don't factor that in when comparing costs."

Where to go from here

The cost of revamping each department's communications systems isn't clear and may never be fully known since the county may not be involved in the process for some of the groups. What is clear is the consistent move from older analog systems to digital, which is supported by the state network. But agencies will be doing that upgrading now on their own terms, Kennedy said.

"They're using antiquated equipment and can't wait forever," Kennedy said.

After scaling back its participation in January, the county is now a gateway partner, giving its agencies access to the state network only in large-scale emergency situations.

But getting even that level of service will make some upgrades necessary. That level of change is difficult and may be part of the reason for the negative reactions, Felsen said.

"People are comfortable with things they know and already have," Felsen said. "We're not talking about radios anymore. Now we're talking about computers with antennas, and that's jarring to some people."

Jarring or not, change is coming with FCC regulations on the way that will make analog systems obsolete.

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