

Coming: a modern emergency radio net Commissioners dump firm, set 2-year goal.

Lancaster New Era
Published: Mar 11, 2008
11:18 EST

Article Map Related Share It

Don't Link Tags

By CHAD UMBLE, Staff

For more than a decade, Lancaster County has been trying to upgrade the circa-1950 emergency radio system that often requires firefighters to set up radio relays to communicate effectively at emergency scenes.

Buildings or natural features can easily block radio transmissions, forcing firefighters to create a "whisper-down-the-lane" scenario to talk to one another.

Also, in the current system, police officers and firefighters can't communicate over the same radios.

In 2000, the county hired the company M/A-Com to set up a \$20 million system to modernize emergency radio transmissions, making blocked signals a thing of the past.

Today, county commissioners removed what they say had become the latest impediment to the long-delayed radio system: M/A-Com.

During their work session this morning, the commissioners terminated their contract with the Massachusetts-based company, saying they'll be able to complete the radio system cheaper and faster with someone else.

The county will now begin shopping around for a new vendor and estimates the system can be completed within two years — at a considerable savings.

Commissioner [Craig Lehman](#) said it was important to find a radio system that works the best for emergency responders.

"When we're talking about those folks that protect us, this really is a system that is designed to protect them. And that is very, very important," Lehman said.

Related Topics

[Scott Martin](#) ▼ (138)
[Craig Lehman](#) ▼ (100)
[Mike Weaver](#) ▼ (9)
[emergency respons...](#) ▼ (5)
[Lancaster County-...](#) ▼ (5)
[Lester Houck](#) ▼ (3)

Calling it a win-win situation, Commissioner [Scott Martin](#) welcomed the move to end M/A-Com's contract.

"The most important thing in this process is to make sure the people that are utilizing this system are getting a system that meets their needs and helps them do their job in the realm of public safety," Martin said.

Pennsylvania had an existing contract with M/A-Com for a statewide emergency communications network, which allowed Lancaster and other jurisdictions that

signed up with M/A-Com to get various price breaks.

But [Mike Weaver](#), director of Lancaster County-Wide Communications, said cost savings from piggybacking on the state contract had been lost amid other rising costs.

The county has paid \$13.8 million to M/A-Com for towers, a microwave system and shelters, which can be used in a new system. But as technology advanced, the county said it noticed that M/A-Com's radios cost a lot more than those being offered by some other vendors.

For example, a portable radio from M/A-Com would cost \$8,874, while a similar radio from another vendor is \$2,674, according to the county.

The county was looking at additional costs of \$32 million — for a total of \$46 million — to fulfill the M/A-Com contract and to buy mobile and portable radios and set up a 10-year maintenance contract.

Going with another vendor, the county estimates it can save \$7.6 million, knocking the total cost for the system to around \$39 million.

[Lester Houck](#), chairman of the Radio Project Committee, which has overseen the effort, said the decision to drop M/A-Com had been a long time coming.

"It is definitely good. There really is no downside. The only downside is the time that it has taken, but that has also let us see more options," Houck said.

The county will now be meeting with vendors to discuss the county's needs and expects to select a new vendor sometime this year.

Nicholas Summers, president of Lancaster County's Firemen's Association and a former deputy fire chief in Lancaster City, welcomed the news that the county is moving ahead without M/A-Com.

Summers said it seems like the county was ready to finally deliver on its promise of a new communications system, although he reflected some of the frustration of years of waiting.

"Every time that anybody says anything, it is always 'two or three years away.' I don't know if two or three years will ever get here," he said in a phone interview.

CONTACT US: cumble@LNPnews.com or 481-6031

Related Stories

[Candidates address ove...](#)
[Commissioner hopefuls ...](#)
[Commissioner hopefuls...](#)
[Commissioner race ente...](#)