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City police say radio system in need of fix

New problems lead to changes that could cost \$650K

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Lansing State Journal

Lansing's dead zone is back.

A \$405,000 fix to a troubled police radio system only made emergency communication in the city worse.

In fact, it made it so much worse officials have opted to abandon the solution and temporarily live with the problem while they find a new fix.

And now area taxpayers may have to fork over another \$650,000 for a real fix.

"Our officers have lost confidence in this radio system," said Tom Krug, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police's Capitol City Lodge No. 141 in Lansing. "We have officials who use their cell phones to call 911."

What's the dead zone? It's a 1- to 2-square mile area in southwest Lansing where radio traffic between police and dispatchers is spotty.

In November, Ingham County, which owns the radio system, installed equipment on a tower to improve reception in south Lansing. By mid-December that new equipment began causing problems elsewhere in Lansing.

"In the north part of the city the radios started to do some strange things," said Jeff Kludy, the chief radio technician for the city.

Competing signals from the newly enhanced tower and another tower caused northside police radios to drop out of contact with dispatchers altogether.

"The radios became inoperative," Krug said. "We're talking seconds, but seconds are seconds."

Officials now hope to try a different solution. They'll take that enhanced tower and enhance it even more so that it is fully integrated with the other four towers in the radio system, which serves all of Ingham County.

That way, instead of police radios awkwardly switching from the channels of one tower to separate channels used by another, the radios should seamlessly roam the way private cell phones do.

There's a cost.

Ingham County commissioners in December approved spending up to \$500,000 to make this final fix, and on Feb. 12 they will vote on spending another \$150,000. For all of that extra cash, though, the public is expected to get an extra two years of software from M/A-COM of Lowell, Mass. That's the company from which the county purchased the \$12.5 million communications system in 2006.

The additional money would also cover the cost of an independent consultant.

County officials say they learned: Hire an expert to make sure that a fix is in fact a fix.

"Part of it (the solution) is the consultant," said Lt. Bryce Alford, with the Ingham County Sheriff's Office.

The county had tried to save money last year by opting for the \$405,000 solution, which was paid for in part by the city and county. That option was half the cost of fully integrating the tower. In the end, the county is likely to spend \$1,055,000, officials said.

"It was unforeseen," Alford said of the problems caused by the first solution. "We had no idea it would affect the north."

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