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State's \$2 billion emergency communications system in jeopardy

System kinks hamper project approval

By Tom Precious - NEWS ALBANY BUREAU
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ALBANY — A crucial round of testing of an expensive new emergency communications system— being evaluated in Erie and Chautauqua counties before it goes statewide — has been postponed just a month before officials must decide the project's fate.

The head of the state agency overseeing the project told The Buffalo News she has begun making contingency plans if the vendor now running the ambitious \$2 billion project fails to live up to the contract's terms by the end of August.

Melodie Mayberry-Stewart, director of the state's Office for Technology, said tests scheduled for this week and next in Erie County have been put off until the company running the project, M/A-COM, can correct several key problems affecting the ability of first responders to communicate with one another.

“We want to make sure we're not caught short,” she said of contingency plans begun to ensure that the state can still proceed with efforts to link all state and local emergency agencies across New York into a single, wireless network.

State agencies this week were supposed to run a series of tests in Erie and Chautauqua counties to see if past problems with the communications system have been repaired. Local government first responder agencies were to follow up with their own round of testing next week.

But on Tuesday, local officials were told the tests were being put off — despite the Aug. 29 deadline for the state to decide whether the results of the system's pilot testing in Erie and Chautauqua counties were successful enough to launch it statewide. Officials said it made no sense to test the system until some problems are repaired.

“The Erie and Chautauqua pieces are critical for us to decide whether we are going to go forward or not. If it is not working there, we are committed to not move forward,” Stewart said Friday following a meeting of an advisory board called in Albany to get an update on the much-delayed communications system.



And if the project is not approved by the Aug. 29 deadline? “Then we have to have a contingency plan, and that’s what we’re working on,” she said.

The implications from the Western New York testing are critical for a system that got a major push following communication breakdowns by first responders at the World Trade Center during the 2001 terrorist attacks. It got another boost following embarrassing and dangerous communication problems by various police agencies during the 2006 manhunt in Western New York for fugitive Ralph “Bucky” Philips.

The state and M/A-COM for some time now have been trying to put a happy face on an assortment of problems with what’s known as the Statewide Wireless Network, an Internetbased system that is intended to let everyone from police and fire to transportation and parks agencies communicate with one another over a common network. Earlier testing showed it failed to work in large sections of Erie County — major parts of Buffalo could not get reception with the system.

Stewart said those coverage problems have been mostly fixed. Two critical components remain, she said: Special devices mounted in vehicles that can send signals from a portable radio being carried by an emergency worker to a tower and the voice quality heard on existing radios already purchased by local emergency agencies broadcast over the new system.

The M/A-COM project has been met with praise and complaints. In Chautauqua County, Sheriff Joseph Gerace said the system has brought vast improvement so far over the current radio networks that offer spotty and unpredictable coverage in the mostly rural county.

But in Erie County, some municipalities, like the Erie County government, have said they do not plan to become full partners of the system even if it gets approved; Erie County Executive Chris Collins attributed part of the problem to the estimated \$36 million needed by the county if it wants to buy into the system.

Then there is protectionist turf resistance, as some police, fire and other agencies show reluctance to give up their communications system for one designed and run by the state.

The problems and delays have been met with growing impatience from groups looking forward to a better communication system in the state.

“It is disappointing to know the Statewide Wireless Network project is not only 1½ years behind schedule, but also still in the first phase of development. Unfortunately, the two words we have heard most consistently about this program have been ‘delays’ and ‘failures,’ ” said Daniel De Federicis, president of the New York State Troopers PBA.

The hodgepodge patchwork of communication systems across New York for emergency services prevents adjoining police agencies from communicating with one another. A new system could, advocates say, permit police to talk directly to snowplow operators during a blizzard and would bring coverage to some areas of the state with spotty or no reception.

The \$2 billion M/A-COM contract calls for 97 percent of the counties within the state to be covered with radio reception. M/A-COM officials Friday said they have met that goal in Erie and Chautauqua counties. But there are hundreds of other criteria that also must be met — such as existing, or “legacy,” communication devices being able to work on the system, an important criterion for agencies that cannot afford to upgrade to the new M/A-COM equipment.

M/A-COM officials Friday appeared unfazed by the problems and sounded confident that any remaining issues will be corrected before the end of next month. “I look forward to Aug. 29,” John Vaughn, a M/ACOM vice president, told the advisory panel.

The system has been in the works, in one way or another, since 1998. Critics say it is an expensive boondoggle, while advocates say it represents the future of how emergency services agencies should be able to communicate with one another.

If M/A-COM fails the final evaluation in Erie and Chautauqua counties, it is uncertain what direction the state could take next. It could seek to still improve the M/A-COM solution, rebid the project that could add further delays or just scrap the whole idea of a statewide wireless network.

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