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Political donation amplifies police radio issue

Watchdog group sees potential conflict of interest; communications agency chief says \$1,000 to mayoral campaign came a year after decision to award contract

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Motorola, the company behind Marion County's new \$37 million police and fire radio system, gave the chairman of the Metropolitan Emergency Communications Agency a \$1,000 campaign contribution last year while he was running for re-election as mayor of Beech Grove.

A leading political watchdog group said Motorola's contribution to Mayor Joe Wright raised the potential for a conflict of interest and should have been disclosed to other board members.

"They're making decisions without complete information. That's never good," said Julia Vaughn, policy director of the political watchdog group Common Cause Indiana.

In a statement, Wright said all of the contributions he received were reported in accordance with campaign finance laws and are a matter of public record.

Wright said he received the contribution from Motorola a year after the MECA board voted in July 2006 to award the contract to the communications giant. Motorola made its \$1,000 contribution to Wright last August at a campaign fundraiser hosted by the law firm Barnes and Thornburg.

Wright in recent weeks has defended Motorola in a dispute over who should pay to fix a conflict between headsets and external speakers that are part of the system.

Emergency dispatchers said transmissions coming in through the speakers were hard to discern while they were listening to callers on their headsets and, as a result, were creating safety issues for police and firefighters.

The MECA board last week voted 4-0 to spend \$270,000 to address those complaints. Wright, who previously said Motorola "hit the mark" in delivering just what MECA had ordered, did not vote.

The board did not address whether Motorola should pay for the fix or taxpayers should be left on the hook.

Marion County Public Safety Director Scott Newman, also a MECA board member, said he believes the company should pay for the devices needed to make the fix.

Newman was on vacation this week and unavailable for comment about Motorola's contribution to Wright.

Vaughn, however, said Wright and other politicians need to do a better job of disclosing contributions that raise the potential of a conflict of interest.

"It's a fact which may or may not have any impact on his decision-making," said Vaughn, whose

organization favors publicly financed campaigns. "One of the ways to try to dispel concerns about that is to be completely open to anything that could be perceived as a conflict."

Newman has said he will seek to have Wright removed as MECA chairman because of his stance regarding the headsets.

Newman is upset with Wright because he said the mayor unfairly discounted dispatchers' concerns. He's also upset by Wright's refusal to hold a MECA board meeting in June and July.

At a special mid-July board meeting called by a frustrated Newman, the public safety director said he was "dismayed" at Wright's support of Motorola.

Problems with the system surfaced in May, when Marion County fire chiefs disclosed that their new digital radios conflicted with firefighters' personal alarms. That issue has yet to be addressed.

Dispatchers' complaints about the speakers came soon after the system went live in late June.

Newman and Sheriff's Deputy Chief Joe McAtee said Motorola hadn't delivered what it promised in its contract: a system set up like the county's old analog system, with all audio fed through dispatchers' headsets.

Motorola has declined to comment on that question.

In a statement about the contribution it made to Wright, Motorola said it is "committed to adhering to the highest standards of ethics and transparency in engaging in political activities."
