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N.Y. NETWORK DOESN'T MAKE GRADE

Sep 1, 2008 12:00 PM, By Donny Jackson

State may nix \$2 billion contract following latest round of disappointing tests

With key players in the New York state government proclaiming the first phase of a statewide wireless network a failure, Tyco Electronics M/A-COM appeared to be in jeopardy of losing the largest public-safety LMR contract in the history of the U.S. on the eve of a scheduled decision on the project.

"New York is not much closer to a statewide network today than it was when this whole process started," said Thomas DiNapoli, New York state comptroller, in a statement on Aug. 21. "After three rounds of failed testing, it is apparent that this system is not ready to move forward. M/A-COM has not met its contractual obligations, and New York can't afford to spend \$2 billion on a system that doesn't work right. It's time to fish or cut bait. M/A-COM has to deliver what it promised."

DiNapoli's critical statements coincided with the comptroller's office releasing two audits regarding the Statewide Wireless Network (SWN) — one of which indicated that M/A-COM had failed to fulfill the performance benchmarks in its contract and another that questioned the economic benefit to potential network subscribers.

"Even if the system is fixed, our audit of Erie County demonstrates that localities should seriously look at alternatives to SWN," DiNapoli said, noting that Erie County could save \$30 million by building its own system and paying only for a gateway to interoperate with the statewide network.

The comptroller's first audit cited several deficiencies that existed in all three rounds of testing, the last of which was conducted in July, after M/A-COM had certified the network to be ready. These findings also were acknowledged by the state's Office for Technology (OFT), which delivered its own scathing review of the system performance during an Aug. 13 meeting of the SWN advisory council.

During that meeting, SWN Program Director Jonathan Spanos outlined several perceived deficiencies in the first buildout phase covering Erie and Chautauqua counties. Spanos said the July test demonstrated a 31% failure rate for mobile radios tested on the system, a 60% failure rate among vehicular tactical repeaters and a 78% failure rate for portable radios.

"A failure was defined as the radio being rendered inoperative, whether it was by a hardware failure or a software failure," he said.

These equipment failure rates were higher than was experienced during the first two rounds of testing, said Melodie Mayberry-Stewart, the state's CIO and OFT director. "It appeared that, as you fixed one thing, something else was not fixed," she said during the Aug. 13 meeting.

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Spanos cited other system performance problems regarding handoffs between vehicular repeaters and network towers, the capacity of the vehicular-repeater solution, the emergency-call function and intermittent failures of the caller-alias feature. In addition, four M/A-COM gateways "did not demonstrate consistent voice quality to public-safety grade. It did not allow these existing systems to be ported through," he said, noting the need to connect legacy systems to ensure interoperability.

But perhaps the most significant statistic noted by Spanos was network downtime. During the July testing period, the network was down for 43 hours and 51 minutes — the contract allows only 82 minutes of downtime per year, he said.

M/A-COM disputed many of the findings; in the comptroller's audit, company officials were cited as deeming the audit to be "inappropriate and unfounded."

M/A-COM spokeswoman Victoria Dillon said the company did considerable work after the July tests to remedy virtually all areas of concern, expressing confidence that the network meets contractual obligations. The company was not given details regarding some of the failure statistics cited by OFT, so the company declined to comment on the matter. However, Dillon said the network gateways function well.

"We stand by our gateways and our ability to connect legacy systems — it's experienced technology that we've used effectively in other states," Dillon said, noting that gateways are not designed to repair poor audio quality in an existing system. "Sometimes, all it takes is an adjustment to the legacy systems, which has been done — something that was above and beyond what the contract called for."

New York's OFT was scheduled to provide the state with a "go/no-go" recommendation regarding acceptance of the first phase of the SWN network by Aug. 29. If the state does not accept the first phase, it has the right to nix the \$2 billion contract and not pay any money to M/A-COM, which already has spent more than \$50 million on the project and has secured a \$100 million performance bond.

DECISION TIME

July 7-21

New York's Office for Technology conducts the third round of testing on the first phase of the network in Erie and Chautauqua counties.

Aug. 13

SWN Program Director Jonathan Spanos presents results of the final round of testing, citing high equipment and network failure rates.

Aug. 21

New York Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli releases two audits critical of the project, citing technical and economic reasons.

Aug. 29

OFT to determine whether it will accept the first phase of the SWN network.

Oct. 1

New York to determine whether to proceed with the \$2 billion SWN contract with Tyco Electronics M/A-COM.

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