

County radio: Over, & out

In market again, nine years after signing on for a new emergency system that didn't come together.

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Sunday News
Jul 12, 2009 00:19 EST

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The tower in the Williamson Park area of Lancaster County Central

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They call it "the wow factor."

More than a decade ago, when Lancaster County officials saw presentations of a new statewide emergency radio system in Harrisburg, they were bowled over by the technology.

But nine years after the county signed a contract to build its own OpenSky network, Lancaster County-Wide Communications is about to swap "wow" for workable.

By the end of August, the agency overseeing the radio project hopes to start the process of choosing contractors to replace OpenSky with something different.

Exactly what that might be is open for discussion. County emergency officials are looking at several options, including use of a communications band vacated by the much-ballyhooed switch from analog to digital television signals last month.

Mike Weaver, director of countywide communications, said that as work progressed — slowly — on OpenSky, project managers found problems with the way the system operated. Those concerns culminated in the county commissioners' March 2008 vote to terminate its contract with supplier M/A-Com.

For three police departments and one fire company, that means M/A-Com radios bought for the new system are obsolete already. Lancaster city's police bureau is trying to find another agency to buy its useless equipment.

County government already has spent more than \$13.8 million on OpenSky radio towers, a microwave system and other equipment. But county Commissioner Scott Martin said last week that it might be possible to finish the long-delayed radio project for less than the \$35 million originally budgeted in 1999.

"First and foremost, the system's got to work for the people using it," Martin said. "We can't have doubts in the most desperate times that it's going to work."

Form and function

When the county went shopping for a new emergency radio network in 1996 to replace an overburdened 1950s-era system, state government was in the market, too.

The state offered county governments the chance to piggyback on its contracts for OpenSky, an 800-megahertz network that used voice-over-Internet-protocol technology — the same kind that allows phone calls to be placed over an Internet connection.

M/A-Com then was part of a Pennsylvania firm, AMP Inc. (sold to Tyco Electronics in 1999). The state pitched OpenSky as a way to allow emergency agencies across Pennsylvania to talk to each other and to send voice and data transmissions on the same channels.

After Lancaster County signed its own deal in 2000, problems cropped up, including the bankruptcy of the contractor hired to build the towers. The number of towers was pared from 54 to 32, with coverage amplified by mobile "repeater" units stationed in emergency vehicles. Weaver said coverage was fine, but "functionality" problems turned up in tests of OpenSky equipment. Field radios required codes to be punched into a keypad, for instance.

"When the building's on fire or you're trying to get the bad guy, you just want to push the button and talk to who you need to talk to," Weaver said.

Testers also noticed that emergency vehicles couldn't park too closely to each other without causing interference, said Timothy Baldwin, deputy director of countywide communications. There were fears about whether digital radios might not work when firefighters entered modern buildings, with their own array of digital technology.

And the radios were expensive, especially portable units.

Plus, said Les Houck, chairman of the radio project committee, the technology originally presented a decade ago never quite came to pass as originally pitched.

"The emergency services said, 'This just isn't going to work,'" Weaver said.

Because OpenSky is software-based, it would have required frequent upgrades and maintenance contracts that county officials determined would run millions of dollars annually, Weaver said.

New York state, which signed a \$2 billion contract with M/A-Com in 2004 to build OpenSky there, subsequently canceled the deal. Cumberland County, which also piggybacked on Pennsylvania's contracts, has run into problems with loss of radio signals in some areas.

Pennsylvania still does not have OpenSky working as planned, 13 years after announcing the system. The state Office of Public Safety Radio Services reported in June that PA-STARNet, as it's called, has cost \$368 million so far.

Tyco sold M/A-Com to Harris Corp. in May.

Changing direction

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In March 2008, a new board of county commissioners pushed the reset button. Reversing two previous boards, Dennis Stuckey, Martin and Craig Lehman canceled the M/A-Com contract.

In the 10 years since the OpenSky proposal, new and attractive options have become available, Weaver said. One of those is "T-band," or television band, frequencies.

With television broadcasters having migrated from analog to digital signals, chunks of the airwaves have been freed up; the Federal Communications Commission said early in the digital transition process that it would consider allocating some of that spectrum to public safety uses.

The county has applied for FCC permission to use UHF channel 15, now held by a television station in Arlington, Va. Weaver said the application is being reviewed in the FCC's broadcast division, but there is no timetable for the agency to make its decision.

Weaver said Lebanon, Dauphin and York counties use UHF frequencies. The UHF signals get better penetration than 800 MHz, and while they're not as good as the VHF range, they don't get as much interference, so that part of the spectrum is "probably the best of all worlds for radio."

Because the FCC could deny the application, the county also is readying "Plan B." One option is using the 800 MHz frequencies that would have been part of the OpenSky network, but not with the Internet-type technology.

The project committee got five responses to a request in February for ideas on developing a radio system using the existing towers and microwave equipment. Now the committee hopes to issue a formal request for proposals from suppliers by the end of August.

OpenSky had been budgeted around \$35 million in 1999. Martin said it's possible that the county could bring in a new network for around \$27 million in current dollars. The \$13.8 million already spent won't be wasted: "It's not only a safety-conscious but a cost-conscious decision."

But saving money at the county level won't necessarily help four emergency agencies that already bought OpenSky equipment.

One of those was the Lancaster Bureau of Police. In 2005, when the county expected OpenSky to be finished soon, the city bought 107 M/A-Com portable radios and accessories with a \$297,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, according to police Capt. Stephen A. Skiles.

"Those radios are currently in storage waiting to be sold, if we can find a buyer," he said.

Patrick Hopkins, the city's director of administrative services, said \$800,000 has been authorized in Lancaster's capital improvement budget for police and fire radios, but that doesn't mean the money is actually available. Pat Brogan, chief of staff to Mayor Rick Gray, said the city is hoping to find other funding sources, possibly from federal economic stimulus money.

The county plans to reuse some of its M/A-Com equipment to communicate with state agencies via PA-STARNet.

In the meantime, the county continues to rely on its old radio network. The biggest problem, Weaver said, is that it's overloaded and has no room for growth.

The new system will be built with the input of emergency agencies, county officials pledged. The network may not have all the bells and whistles of OpenSky, but it will be workable in the field. And the radios will be cheaper.

"They want something reliable and dependable," Weaver said.

The wrong way?

So did the county waste 10 years and \$13.8 million, especially considering some first responders were voicing concerns about OpenSky all along?

The project committee and the commissioners don't think so.

When OpenSky was first proposed, "everybody in the safety industry agreed it was a great concept," Les Houck said. The vision for a fully connected network of emergency agencies was exciting, Weaver added: "This was too good not to take advantage of."

"We were trying to be team players," Stuckey said. But when problems turned up, something had to be done.

"A lot of people never expected the county to take that kind of step," Weaver said. "It was a gutsy move to say, 'You know what? This just isn't working for us.'"

Stuckey said the most important factor in the radio project isn't money, but whether police officers and firefighters can talk when they most need to talk.

"We don't want one bit of doubt in their minds that if they need to call for help ... the signal's not going to go out and be received."

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