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## July crash of city's radio system laid to faulty maintenance

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Hear this: It was all the tech guy's fault.

The 40-minute collapse of the city's \$62 million Motorola radio system on July 22 was the result of "operator error . . . during routine maintenance," according to a report submitted yesterday to City Council.

The main system and the three backup systems that police officers rely on crashed that night when dozens of cops tried to respond to an assist call from Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey, who was at the scene of a street brawl.

A Motorola employee did maintenance work earlier in the day on "a component of the secondary controller," the report states, but "necessary settings were not properly entered into the component."

In simpler terms, when the main system was overwhelmed that night, "It had nowhere to roll to. Instead of rolling to the backup systems, it ran into a brick wall," said Frank Punzo, deputy commissioner for the Department of Public Property.

It took about 40 minutes for a Motorola technician to get the system up and running again on July 22.

The report states that a number of actions have been taken to prevent a similar crash from occurring, including more frequent testing of the back-up systems and new maintenance procedures for Motorola employees.

But the summertime collapse was another black eye for Motorola's 800-megahertz digital system, which the city started using in 2002.

Reliability concerns plagued the system from the start. In 2005, the city said that it had solved the major problems. Earlier this year, the *Daily News* learned of 14 crashes and malfunctions that had

occurred since then. Yesterday's report did little to soothe critics of the system, including Ramsey.

"It's still inexcusable, in my opinion, that the system could fail like that in the first place," Ramsey said. "Any system can crash, but the back-ups cannot fail.

"If memory serves me correct, we've had three officers die since then. What if [the crash] happened then?"

The report said the city is exploring a "number of permanent solutions" to make the system more reliable, chief among them an upgrade to another Motorola system that has a price tag of \$30 million to \$40 million.

The system would mostly be paid for with money from a state law-enforcement fund, Punzo said.

"That's probably one of the only reasons we would be able to do it," he said. "The fund is designed to be used for public safety."

The upgraded system would be able to handle much heavier volumes of radio traffic before it would need to switch to a back-up system, said Police Chief Inspector Michael Feeney.

"We took the traffic that we had the day Officer Patrick McDonald was killed [Sept. 23] and doubled that load to get a sense of what it could handle," said Feeney, who heads the Information Technology and Communications Services Bureau.

"Our system is nowhere as bad as people paint it to be, but the upgrade would solve a lot of the issues we have."

The new system also would be equipped with digital repeaters that would provide better coverage to firefighters who go below ground or up in high-rises.

City Councilman Frank Rizzo said that he has asked Motorola if the city can sell its system - which will be considered outdated by 2010 - to another city.

"It's something to consider," Rizzo said. "The ability to resell the old equipment could bring down that \$40 million figure a little bit."

While critics - notably the police and fire unions - continue to tee off on Motorola, Punzo said that the city doesn't have the time or the funds to consider bringing in a new system from a different company.

Ramsey said it's critical that the city be able to count on the radio system in times of crisis.

"Whether or not we should stay with Motorola, I don't have a big opinion," he said. "We had different systems in the other cities I worked in, and we had problems there, too.

"Motorola isn't new to the radio business. They should be able to provide a system that works." \*

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