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Pa. County Fire Chiefs May Dump New Radios

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Aug. 17--Three southwestern York County fire chiefs will meet Tuesday to decide whether their firefighters should continue using the county's new 911 system.

Penn Township Fire Chief Jan Cromer said the new digital system, which cost about \$36 million, is worse in southwestern York County than its analog predecessor. There are big gaps in coverage, he said, and communication between firefighters at incidents is unreliable.

Cromer said he, Hanover Fire Commissioner James Roth and the Pleasant Hill Volunteer Fire Co. Chief Ted Clouser will meet to decide how best to protect their firefighters.

The trio could decide to tell their firefighters to stop carrying radios for the new system and instead rely on the old, analog network.

"The way it's (the new network is) working presently, I don't think it's going to be a question of if a firefighter gets critically injured or killed, it's going to be when," Cromer said. "My first concern is to send my people home safe. I have some poor feelings about this."

Fire department and ambulance personnel switched to the new 911 system late last month.

Most happy: Many fire officials are largely pleased with the new network, but fire officials in southwestern York County have reported continuing problems.

Cromer said firefighters have experienced temporary blackouts when the system appears to malfunction and noted it has big gaps in coverage. Plus, he said, communication is unreliable when firefighters group together at incidents.

For example, he said, one firefighter might try to send a message to an incident commander at a fire but the commander never gets it. Instead, someone else will.

Such failures could prevent commanders from directing firefighters to get out of buildings that appear to be in imminent danger of collapse because of fire, he said.

Response: Eric Bistline, who is heading the 911 project for the county, said the new system is meeting or exceeding coverage expectations. He said staff from the county and system vendor have been in southwestern York County and are satisfied with testing results.

Radio systems aren't perfect, he said, so there are spots where coverage doesn't exist. But he said the new radio network is far better than its predecessor.

Nonetheless, Bistline said the county is looking at whether it can improve paging and radio performance in Hanover and the surrounding area.

"We are sensitive to their concerns," he said. "We have not closed the door on

the issue."

Eagle Fire Co. Fire Chief Ryan Brenneman said he's generally pleased with the new system. The fire company's jurisdiction includes Mount Wolf and the eastern half of East Manchester Township in northeastern York County.

"I think the system overall has huge potential," he said. "It's greater than anything we have experienced."

Retrospect: However, Brenneman said he wishes vehicle-mounted radios had been installed before firefighters transitioned to the new system. His company ran into a problem last week when a vehicle was overrun by storm waters.

There was no radio coverage using portable radios, he said. Normally, he could have relied on vehicle-mounted radios in the fire apparatus to communicate with York County 911, he said. Vehicle mounted radios are stronger and tend to have better reception, he said.

But instead, Brenneman had to use a vehicle-mounted radio installed in a police car.

Brenneman was contacted Friday about the problem and will work with York County project planners to find a remedy, he said, such as having at least one of the vehicles more quickly equipped with the radios.

York City Deputy Fire Chief Steve Buffington said, in retrospect, he believes local fire chiefs should probably have pushed harder to ensure that the mobiles were installed before fire departments transitioned to the system. The York City Fire Department has had a few problems with the new radios, he said, but didn't expect a totally perfect system.

Part of it is equipment-related, he said, but part is also a need for dispatchers and fire personnel to get used to the new system.

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