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13-year radio system project could finally wrap up

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This year, Pennsylvania expects to finish building a \$368 million radio system -- a process that has dragged on since 1996 -- even as New York last week killed a similar system over questions whether it will work.

Some Pennsylvania lawmakers also say the technological advances of the past 10 years may have made the system for emergency responders, which is now in partial use, obsolete.

"It's never acceptable for any public-safety project to take 10 years," said state Sen. Kim Ward, R-Westmoreland, who serves on the Communications and Technology Committee and the Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee.

More than 20 state agencies, including the state police, and 47 county 911 centers are connected to the Pennsylvania Statewide Radio Network. In all, users made more than 39 million transmissions last year, said Charles Brennan, director of the system.

Some state lawmakers have called for inquiries into the project, which was launched in 1996 with a price tag of \$179 million. It will cost more than twice that when completed.

"Here's something that was sold to the taxpayers for \$179 million, and here we are at several hundred million dollars. It's way over what it was supposed to be. Why?" said state Sen. Michael Folmer, chairman of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee.

The network was designed to replace incompatible, aging radio systems with a single, centrally managed system for both voice and data.

Industry representatives said that instead of sinking millions into radio towers and transmitters and the problems associated with them, police could send and receive voice and data with Blackberries at a fraction of the cost.

New York officials last week canceled a \$2 billion contract with M/A-COM, the primary vendor responsible for building Pennsylvania's system, after declaring the company in default of the contract in August.

The Pennsylvania system has had its share of problems. Police have reported difficulties with portable radios, cell phone "walkovers," lost signals and distortion.

New York officials cited 19 significant deficiencies, including equipment failures, unreliable emergency call modes and inconsistent in-building coverage.

A spokeswoman for the Lowell, Mass.-based company said the New York and Pennsylvania systems are "similar, but not identical."

"Pennsylvania has its own system and its own plan. They have elements that are the same and certain technologies," said M/A-COM's Victoria Dillon, who said the company was "following the state's plans."

Lawmakers who have called the radio system "a financial black hole" said they'll be hard-pressed to put any more money into it with the budget as tight as it is.

"This was a head-scratcher from the get-go," said state Rep. Tim Solobay, a Canonsburg Democrat.

Brennan said the system will be completed within its budget. "We are budgeted for \$368 million, and we will be able to bring the system home with that budget," he said.

Work in 17 counties is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Folmer said his committee will be one of several taking a hard look at the system in the coming months.

"We've invested heavily and it's not working yet. I want to know why," said Folmer, a Republican representing parts of Berks, Chester, Dauphin, Lancaster and Lebanon counties.

A major problem has been the difficulty and cost of installing radio towers in remote, mountainous areas. The system eventually will have 1,100 towers. Now operational are 235 high-profile towers, 200 to 400 feet high, and 518 low-profile micro-cells, about 80 feet high, that fill gaps between the larger towers. Still awaiting completion are 347 low-profile towers.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the state expanded the system to include all emergency responders, requiring connections to county dispatch centers and further inflating costs. That helped push the cost from \$7,000 a square mile to about \$30,000 a square mile.

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