

York County 911: Back to the past?

York County might have to return to its old radio system, at least temporarily, while the new system is being fixed.

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In a Dec. 24 e-mail, Eric Bistline told county police chiefs that because of ongoing problems with York County 911's new radio system, the county might have to return to the old system as a last resort.

Bistline, who is York County's director of emergency services, also wrote that he has told M/A-COM, the new system's manufacturer and installer, to develop a plan to move the county back to the old system.

"Obviously, we're having problems with the radio system," Bistline said Wednesday from Lynchburg, Va., where he was meeting with

executives of Tyco Electronics, M/A-COM's parent company. "This is a huge undertaking . . . We knew there were going to be things that we'd need to address as we went along."

However, he added later, "We thought it was going to be a smoother transition."

York County opened bids to replace its antiquated system in 2005 and chose between M/A-COM and Motorola.

Testing of the \$36 million system, which includes radios, software and towers, began in early 2008. Several glitches -- including lost or garbled transmissions -- were discovered as agencies "cut over" to the new system in the latter part of the year.

Bistline's e-mail also told chiefs that he is halting the installation of radios in police cruisers to prepare for the possibility of going back to the old system.

"If this was going to be a very protracted thing . . . I just didn't want to get any more users on there," he said. "I didn't want to put anybody in harm's way."

Bistline said that, if the county returned to the old system, it would be a temporary move.

"Our plan was never to scrap it," he said. "We may have to go back for an undetermined amount of time, (but) there's no way we're going to throw this thing in the trash."

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M/A-COM spokesman Steve Frackleton said in a December interview the problems with the system are akin to typical growing pains.

"For a system this size, yes, we're in the middle of a typical implementation program," he said.

M/A-COM technicians are working to identify and develop solutions for any problems with the new system, Frackleton said.

Despite the problems with the new system, Bistline remained positive, saying he didn't think reverting to the old system would ever happen.

"I don't think we're ever going to get there," he said. "Every day, we're having progress."

Chiefs respond

Fairview Township Police Chief Bernard Dugan, who is president of the York County Chiefs of Police Association, said his counterparts are concerned about the ongoing problems with the new radio system.

On Bistline's "last resort" to revert to the old radio system, Dugan said, "If that's what it takes, then that's what it takes. . . . More and more it's appearing there are some issues that are more than little tweaks."

Dugan said the chiefs association plans to send a letter to the York County commissioners and Bistline voicing their concerns about the persistent problems.

"We can't keep on going much longer without some resolution," he said.

Still, Dugan said Friday he wanted to allay any fears the public might have about reduced police coverage.

"We still can communicate to get police services wherever they need to be," he said.

Although a few police departments around the county have discarded their old radios, Dugan said his department has not, to have them as a back-up.

John Snyder, police chief in Newberry Township, said his officers have carried Nextel phones for several years as a back-up so they can talk with each other and York County 911 if their radios are inoperable.

With the new system, Snyder's officers have told him about "dead spots" in their jurisdiction and trouble with transmitting, "but we had that with the old radio, too," he said.

"All I know is when I press the button, I want it to work," Snyder said.

Southern Regional Police Chief James Childs said Bistline's e-mail was about putting M/A-COM "on notice . . . look, let's step up to the plate and get things working."

"It was a surprise to me, but that says to me that he's (Bistline) willing to do whatever it takes," Childs said. "We can't lose faith in it; he's trying

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to make it work."

Rectifying the situation

Bistline said that, since late last year, Tyco technicians, programmers and engineers -- a group he describes as the company's "best and brightest" -- have been in York County to fix the new system.

Bistline also set up a system through which police officers can call a York County 911 supervisor and report problems with the system. The details are entered into a database, which is sent by e-mail to M/A-COM and York County 911 representatives. Every day, county officials have a conference call with M/A-COM to discuss the problems and how to solve them, he said.

Bistline said that, before the contract was awarded, the county researched M/A-COM and Motorola.

"We did detailed background checks on the companies, called references," he said.

Still, M/A-COM has attracted controversy in other parts of the country. On Aug. 29, the State of New York's Office of Technology issued a letter of default to M/A-COM, saying that its OpenSky communications system was found to be unreliable on three separate occasions. The state gave M/A-COM 45 days to fix the problems.

A news release on M/A-COM's Web site, also dated Aug. 29, states, "Contrary to public

allegations made by OFT, Tyco Electronics has met or exceeded contractual requirements for the project and is prepared to vigorously defend that position."

A story in The New York Times on Saturday said New York state officials are close to canceling its \$2 billion contract with M/A-COM.

Lawyers for M/A-COM countered with threats of a lawsuit, the report states.

"A major problem has been the difficulty and unanticipated cost of installing radio towers in remote, mountainous areas, according to the officials and technical experts, who spoke anonymously because the contract dispute is at a delicate juncture," the newspaper report states. "To finish the project, state officials decided that considerably more money would have to be spent at a time when the state is expected to have large budget deficits."

In March, Lancaster County commissioners ended their contract with M/A-COM to set up a radio system, according to a Lancaster New Era story. Years after the contract had been signed, the county realized that it could buy items such as portable radios far more cheaply than what M/A-COM was offering.

The Lancaster story did not contain a response from M/A-COM.

"I keep my finger on the pulse of that situation up there (in New York), as I do with Lancaster," Bistline said. "I want to see what their response

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is, are they able to address those needs. . . .
Quite frankly, the New York state system is a
different technology, (but) it does make you
wonder if you're going to have those problems."

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