



January 20, 2010

Fire union: Radio tweaks not a solution

By Sharon Coolidge
scoolidge@enquirer.com

No long term solution for Hamilton County's communication system, which fails to transmit some calls and sends others as a garbled mess, was identified Wednesday during a meeting between Cincinnati Fire Department administrators and fire union officials.

The discussion comes in the wake of two missed mayday calls in the last three months and daily problems with garbled communication, said Cincinnati Fire Union President Marc Monahan. Both put firefighters and the public in danger, he said.

Monahan said the radios are so bad that during fires the union wants the department to go back to the old communication system which allowed firefighters to talk directly to each other, as though they were using walkie-talkies, instead of the new digital system that routes calls through a computer. He pointed to fire departments in cities such as Columbus, Phoenix and New York which have dropped or stayed away from digital radios for similar reasons.

Monahan said city officials are offering to make four tweaks to the radios that would help with garbled calls, a recommendation they said came from the manufacturer, Motorola.

It is unclear how soon those tweaks could be made.

Monahan and other union officials are skeptical that will help.

"I wanted to come out of here with a plan and I don't think we got that," said District Chief Tom Lakamp, the union's safety committee chairman.

"They gave us a song and dance that will tweak a few things, but we won't see real fixes," Monahan added. "We'll continue to hear that we have to live with the system we have."

Four fire department officials - Capt. Michael Washington, District Chiefs Roy Winston and Randy Freel and Assistant Fire Chief Mike Kroeger - declined to talk about the issue with an Enquirer reporter after the meeting.

The meeting was not open to the public.

Washington, the department's spokesman, directed questions to Cincinnati Fire Chief Robert Wright, who did not return a call for comment.

After an article in The Enquirer last week, County Commissioners asked communication officials for an update on problems with the system. That report could come as soon as next week.

Problems with dropped and garbled calls started cropping up soon after the county activated the \$35 million Motorola communication system in 2003, which for the first time allowed public safety agencies to talk to each other.

Firefighters quickly found they were getting busy signals when more than one person tried to talk at

once and garbled transmissions due to background noise like engines, burning buildings and the barrier of their fire-safety suits.

In addition, radio transmissions often fail in high-rises and hospitals.

"They have to weigh what's more important: the benefit of being able to communicate across town or the country or incidents like we've had where firefighters are down and need to be heard," Monahan said.
