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Panel recommends borrowing for troubled police radio system

By [Ryan Haggerty](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: March 19, 2010 | [\(2\) Comments](#)

A Milwaukee Common Council committee on Friday recommended the borrowing of nearly \$1 million for the Police Department's troubled new digital radio system but required that police officials provide an update on the system before spending the money.

The city originally authorized the borrowing of the \$952,000 for the radio system in 2005, but the council must reauthorize the borrowing because the money has not been spent.

The radio system, known as OpenSky, has cost about \$17.5 million since 2003 and became fully operational last month. It was initially expected to cost about \$14.9 million and be operational by May 2005, according to city officials.

The money backed by the council's Finance and Personnel Committee on Friday already was included in the \$17.5 million total.

The system has been [plagued with problems](#) from the start, including dead spots and faulty equipment, police and city officials have said.

Both Ald. Michael J. Murphy and Ald. Robert J. Bauman said Friday that they have received calls from people - including police officers - who are concerned about the system.

City officials need to see evidence that the system is working properly before approving the expenditure of the reauthorized funding, especially because the city has spent "\$17 million for something that doesn't work," Ald. Joe Dudzik said.

"I'd like to know that police officers are safe," Dudzik said. "And if the Fire Department ever gets on board with this completely, I'd like to know that they're safe, as well."

The Fire Department and other city agencies are supposed to join the Police Department in using OpenSky. The Fire Department is planning on testing some mobile radios by the end of the month, a spokeswoman said.

The OpenSky system cannot be monitored by radio scanners, [preventing the public](#) from listening to broadcasts.

Milwaukee police began the switch from an analog radio system to the digital system in 2003 in an effort to comply with modified federal regulations regarding radio communications that take effect in 2013.

The regulations do not require law enforcement agencies to use a digital system, but many agencies are switching from analog as digital radio technology develops.

The Milwaukee Police Department is not the first agency to have trouble with OpenSky.

New York State terminated its \$2 billion contract last year with OpenSky's manufacturer, formerly known as M/A-COM and then Tyco Electronics Wireless Systems. The company had been hired to build a statewide wireless emergency communications network.

The state claimed the company failed to fix 15 of 19 deficiencies the state had identified, including dead spots and failures of the radios' emergency buttons, according to a summary prepared by Milwaukee officials.

The system's manufacturer then sued New York, claiming the state had canceled the contract because of political and financial pressure, the summary says.

Last month, the Milwaukee Police Department hired consulting firm Federal Engineering Inc. to monitor implementation of the radio system. New York State hired the same company before terminating its contract for the OpenSky system.

Milwaukee police have paid Federal Engineering nearly \$149,000 for the first phase of the contract, according to city documents. The department is due to pay about \$135,000 for the contract's second phase.

The entire contract is being paid through the proceeds of assets forfeited to the Police Department, according to city documents.

Meanwhile, Florida-based Harris Corp., which bought the radio system's manufacturer last year, has agreed to pay the total cost of about \$3 million to replace the Milwaukee Police Department's dispatch consoles, which are becoming obsolete, police officials said Friday.

The Police Department also is withholding payment of about \$750,000 to Harris Corp. until the department is satisfied with the progress that has been made on the system, Police Finance and Planning Manager John Ledvina told aldermen Friday.

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Washington County is in the process of going to a similar system with the same provider. Hopefully there are no issues with their system. I believe that it is a county-wide system. Not sure how far they are in the process.

2. [Patrick Dorwin - Mar 20, 2010 9:02 AM](#)

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I wish the media would focus on what the police officers themselves are saying about this failed system. I don't mean to plug my blog, but the fact is, officers feel more comfortable relating experiences there than they do with the media. if you check BadgerBlogger.com and read the comments on the OpenSky posts we have done, you will read things that officers are saying.

One officer said: "It's terrible. There are dead spots all over the place, no matter how many "repeaters" or "boosters" they put up. No matter what, you cannot get on the air when someone else has there mic open (whether they are talking or by accident). Its a huge safety issue, and a cop is going to get hurt because of it. I personally have been in a few situations where the air was needed immediately. I was in a foot pursuit for 30 seconds before my partner was able to get on the air because someone is talking. That is a long time when you are chasing somebody. Another time was when my partner and I observed two guys getting into a stolen car, couldnt get on the air, by the time we did, we were already chasing them."

Another officer says: "Only one radio can transmit on a particular channel at a given time...so if someone is blabbing while an officer in need of help tries to request it, the officer in peril has to wait until the channel clears or he/she would have to change channels in hope of finding an open one. Not an easy task if you're fighting for your life. This was not a problem under the previous analog system using Motorola hardware."

Another officer made this stunning admission: "an example is i recently was in a foot chase, i tried to broadcast, but the dispatcher was talking. as i was running after the guy, he dropped a pistol and kept running. seeing as he dropped a pistol and i could not get the air, i stopped running after him. screw it, i am not going to get hurt or lose my life to this system."

We have many other such comments posted, our officers deserve better!

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