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## DuPage panel ponders rocketing 911 costs

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In an emergency, good communication is critical. There isn't much argument about that, but along with efficiency, cost is a factor that must be weighed. For many people, \$48 million looks unwieldy.

The project in the works by the DuPage County Emergency Telephone System Board is aimed at creating a countywide radio system to enhance the response to 911 calls and other emergencies. Launched with a contract awarded to sole bidder Motorola in September 2006 for slightly less than \$7.1 million, the undertaking grew significantly more expensive when an adjustment less than two years later added nearly \$6.6 million to the outlay. Unless they switch to a plan B, board members say, the price tag will go up to about \$48 million.

Funded through subscriber fees and slated to go online in January 2011, the privately owned system no longer appears sustainable, officials now say -- especially if a full complement of police and fire departments can't be signed on.

"We're not going to have interoperability if the cost is so high that we don't get the participation we need," said Hinsdale Police Chief Brad Bloom, who represents the county's police chiefs on the board.

A member "off and on" since 2003, Bloom said the cost has ballooned far beyond what anyone envisioned three years ago. He said the contract add-on in June 2008 arose from a need to increase the capacity after the project generated more interest than expected among local agencies. Although the expense far exceeded limitations set in the county's purchasing ordinance, it went through after being reviewed by DuPage County State's Attorney Joe Birkett's office, Bloom said. And as the board began working on the design of the system, it turned out more towers and equipment would be needed than they had thought.

"It just got to be more than we anticipated," Bloom said.

ETSB board chairman and County Board member Patrick O'Shea said most of the outlay approved in the contract and subsequent change order has yet to be spent. The nine distribution sites and five towers are not yet up, he said.

"Those are on hold right now, because if we have a better system, and we think we do, then we'll want to go with that instead," O'Shea said.

Instead of the private system arranged through Motorola, the board is considering a public approach that wouldn't entail nearly as large an expense.

### Talking points

Dan Voiland wants to make sure the new radio system chosen jointly by Naperville and Aurora a year ago speaks the same language as the emergency network being lined up for the county's first responders.

"We had put pieces in our system so we could definitely talk to DuPage County," said Voiland, Naperville's telecommunications manager.

Voiland last week took the case for compatibility to the ETSB, saying the two cities' purchase contract with Harris Corp. relies on the new equipment being interoperable with the systems used in nearby law enforcement and fire agencies.

"If you are going to be making a purchase, perhaps you would be willing to look at the big picture to see that these new systems are interoperable," Voiland told the board.

According to Bloom, the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, magnified the importance of streamlined communication systems. He said the board recognizes the need for departments to be able to share information quickly and efficiently.

"What we're trying to accomplish is interoperability, and I certainly wouldn't want to exclude anybody," Bloom said. "We have so many different, disparate radio networks."

He also acknowledges that there are great savings to be had in using a system that doesn't have to be built from the ground up.

"We know one of the biggest barriers to interoperability participation for the municipalities is the ongoing maintenance costs," Bloom told the steering committee in a September meeting.

### Open channels

Bloom would like the board to make sure it scrutinizes all of its options, and isn't necessarily suggesting ending the existing contract with Motorola.

O'Shea noted that choosing a public system with its infrastructure already in place would amount to substantial savings.

"When you own your own system, you have to pay for maintenance every year, you have to find the sites," he said. "I think this gives us everything we want, without the liability and a lot of the maintenance cost."

The Motorola system the board currently aims to put online, O'Shea said, is in use by Illinois State Police and many other law enforcement agencies in the area. He said he isn't familiar with the equipment Naperville and Aurora chose, which isn't yet in use.

"I haven't really looked at the specifications of their system," O'Shea said.

Bloom said Motorola needs to put together a fresh presentation, outlining what they can offer. The most economically viable system is still the one that will draw the greatest number of subscribing agencies.

The steering committee will weigh in on the matter at its next meeting, set for 2 p.m. Thursday at the Westmont Police Department.

"If they tell us that it looks good to them, then we'll go with it," O'Shea said.