

Valley & State

Report criticizes state radio network planning

March 24, 2011 2:00 AM

PORTLAND — Oregon legislators blame misinformation for a proposal to spend hundreds of millions on a statewide radio network that could meet federal requirements for a fraction of the cost. The proposed statewide network suffered under managers who ignored proposals that could have cut the project's risks, scale and cost, The Oregonian newspaper reported.

According to findings from the Joint Committee on Legislative Audits and Information Management and Technology, released Tuesday, network officials repeatedly ignored simpler and less expensive designs.

Legislators said they only now understand that previous network managers sold a far bigger project than was necessary.

"They wanted a Cadillac system, and we were led down the path to believe the Cadillac was what we needed," said Sen. David Nelson, R-Pendleton, a longtime radio network supporter. "There is no question we were not getting the best information."

The project has state officials scrambling to meet a federal deadline to switch to narrowband radios by the end of 2012.

Oregon is facing a \$3.5 billion deficit in the next biennium. New spending projects are getting long looks by legislators and Gov. John Kitzhaber, who proposed spending \$146 million to update the current public safety radio networks and get two agencies — the Oregon State Police and the Oregon Department of Transportation — to meet the federal deadline for a narrowband network.

The state has already dumped \$31 million into the radio project. Of that, \$13 million was spent on brick-and-mortar construction of radio towers and additions to the state's current microwave radio network that officials say they can still use.

The rest of that money has gone to consultants and overhead costs for the project, which employs 54 people.

Money spent on the project would delay repairs to the state's microwave network, where hours-long outages are the norm and some towers are so decrepit they are nearing failure.

"We already see outages that last hours at a time, and that soon could turn into days if we don't address this," said Tom Lauer, major projects manager at the transportation department, which has been given the job of salvaging the radio project. "It's the biggest risk we face."

Information from: The Oregonian, <http://www.oregonlive.com>

AP-WF-03-23-11 2042GMT