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Sheriff squawking at Steuben radio service

Joyce McCartney

Anyone with a cellphone knows the frustration of talking in an area where there is, at best, a weak signal.

For most, weak signals are inconvenient or annoying.

If, however, you're in need of help and the people providing emergency service are using a radio system that acts as though it has a weak signal, it could put you or them in danger.

That is why Steuben County Sheriff Tim Troyer this month issued a no-confidence statement in the Harris Radio Public Safety and Professional Communication's Open Sky Radio system, which went live in the county in February.

The statement was signed by nine other Steuben County emergency service professionals, including the county's communications director, Cindy Snyder.

It has prompted an informational session with commissioners, Snyder and Troyer slated for 11 a.m. Monday.

The final straw for Troyer was an April 5 stabbing near Crooked Lake, just outside Angola, in which police, firefighters and paramedics were unable to speak with one another using their radios.

They were forced to use cellphones to communicate locations and information.

It was at that point that Troyer and Snyder consulted and decided to switch the county back to its old, analog radio system until a permanent fix is found for the new system.

To date, the county has spent more than \$3.9 million of Major Moves money on this system, according to the county auditor's office.

"Due to the many incidents of failure, the inability to communicate clearly and the inability to operate multiple officers/agencies properly without failure I am issuing to you a **NO CONFIDENCE** statement in the Harris Radio corporation and the Open Sky Radio systems," Troyer wrote to commissioners.

He ends the letter, which he posted on his agency's Facebook page, as follows: "We are all willing to work aggressively with you in obtaining a radio communications system that works properly. Failing to do so will result in the serious injury or death of an emergency services worker or a citizen of Steuben County, and this is not acceptable."

For its part, the system's manufacturer, Harris RF Communications' Public Safety and Public Communications, hopes to get the system in working order for the county, according to a statement from the company's communications director.

"The safety of our public safety users is the first priority for Harris, and we have worked closely with Steuben County public safety officials and agencies towards the shared goal of a safe, reliable and effective communication system for the area's first responders," Victoria Dillon of Harris said in the statement.

Dillon's statement goes on to say that a third party was responsible for the interference that caused the problems.

"Over the last few days, our technicians worked with a local third party that we identified as the source of the recent interference and they have already



Troyer

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Police and fire

■ Crime stoppers

■ Active warrants

The Allen County Sheriff's Department is looking for these people in connection with felony warrants active as of April 11. People with information about the suspects' whereabouts can call Crime Stoppers. Today 3:00 am

■ DEA to collect unused medicines

Area residents are encouraged to rid their homes of expired, unused or unwanted prescription drugs by participating in an event April 30. The local drop-off site for the National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day is the E. Today 3:00 am

■ Crime reports

■ Sector 114/811:31 a.m. Theft from vehicle 2500 Spy Run Ave. Today 3:00 am

■ 3 counts for boy's accused molester

A Fort Wayne man is accused of taking part in sex acts with a boy younger than 14. Mitchell J. Fleming Jr. 26, of the 2100 block of North Clinton Street, was charged Friday with three counts of child molesting. Saturday

■ Auburn sees spate of vehicle break-ins

The Auburn Police Department is looking for the public's help as it investigates several vehicle break-ins that were reported Friday. Saturday

STOCK SUMMARY

Dow	12341.83	+56.68
Nasdaq	2764.65	+4.43
S&P 500	1319.68	+5.16
AEP	35.46	+0.29
Comcast	24.49	+0.24
GE	20.04	+0.04
ITT	58.18	+0.39
LNC	28.87	+0.16
Navistar	65.87	+0.06
Raytheon	48.81	+0.58
SDI	17.78	-0.15
Verizon	37.85	+0.14

taken the appropriate steps to eliminate it," the statement said. "The system performance in this area has returned to normal and we will continue to monitor."

However, Troyer said Thursday afternoon the county is still using the old radio system and that he has questions and concerns that still need addressed, something he hopes will happen at Monday's meeting. Harris representatives are expected to attend, he said.

"I'm trying to keep an open mind," he said.

Radio systems such as Open Sky radio are designed to allow all public safety agencies to communicate with one another. Federal officials virtually mandated such systems because of radio problems during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City.

In Steuben County, it's not just emergency services using the system. The county's highway department and school districts also use the Open Sky system.

The Open Sky system takes voice, converts it to data, sends it along a network line and then converts it back to voice. When things go wrong, voices are garbled and messages don't get across, Troyer said.

Although frustrated, Snyder hopes the contractor responsible for its installation can meet the county's demands – at no additional costs.

Snyder said she hoped to have a plan in place to present at Monday's meeting.

"I told them, we're not going to spend another dime; find a solution for us," she said, adding she hopes that happens because she likes what the system offers.

The same digital radio system has successfully been deployed in Miami-Dade County, Fla., and in Pennsylvania, Dillon's statement said.

"Each of these communities can attest to the enhanced public safety and convenience that has resulted from implementation of our communication systems," Dillon's statement said.

Steuben County Council President Bill Booth, who also serves on the Orland Volunteer Fire Department, is aware of the problems with the radio system. He knows from the perspective of a firefighter that it's a safety issue. But as a county councilman, he said he's not willing to walk away from the radio system yet.

"It definitely needs to be fixed so it's a lot more operable than what it was in the past," he said, describing a system that shuts itself down and garbles words. "They haven't got the final payment yet and they're not going to get paid until this thing is fixed."

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