

Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. What is MERA?

MERA is a partnership of Marin's Cities, Towns, the County, Water, Transit, Public Utility and Fire Protection Districts and various other special districts and organizations that was established in 1998 to build and operate a multi-agency replacement for obsolete, individual emergency radio systems.

2. Who uses MERA's communication system?

Forty-two agencies in all, from Marin County Fire to Novato Police to Tiburon Public Works and Bolinas Fire. It encompasses nearly every agency dealing with public safety in Marin County.

3. Can I use it in an emergency?

You do every time you call 911. It is the backbone of the emergency communication system countywide. However, it is strictly for use by authorized public safety agencies and providers and cannot be used by private citizens. This is meant to ensure enough bandwidth is available during emergencies so lives can be saved in the toughest of disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis or terrorist attack.

4. Do my tax dollars pay for this service?

Yes, but indirectly. Each member user pays into the system at a proportional percentage relative to that agency's size and use. For example, if you're a taxpayer in the City of San Rafael, your tax dollars go to Marin County and the City of San Rafael, both of which then pay into the MERA system. It is designed so that each agency, and by extension each taxpayer, pays their fair share for the services they receive.

5. Why can't they just use smart phones?

This is industrial-strength, military-grade hardware – the best in the world. In a real emergency, smart phones will fail. Think of the number of times your cell phone has dropped a call. We cannot afford to let that happen with our public safety officers and workers when they are responding to an emergency.

6. Why has no one ever heard of MERA?

MERA is actually well known among public safety workers (fire, police, public works, flood control, etc.), but it has worked so well over the past 13 years that it is not on the public's radar. In a big emergency, you'd hear more about MERA, especially if there was a breakdown for any reason.

7. Sounds great, so what's the problem?

The system was designed in 1998 to accommodate 1,580 mobile and portable radios. Today it serves 2,875 radios, which is far above the projected total that was originally anticipated over the 20-year life of the system. Its popularity among the agencies has the potential to overwhelm the system. We need to address this issue before it's too late. That could cost upwards of \$50 million.

8. Why is the solution so expensive?

See answer to question #5 above. When you're buying the best, most resilient communications systems in the world, there are only a few global businesses that sell such solutions. MERA has issued an RFP (Request For Proposal) and the amount of \$50 million seems the most likely cost for our needs. The bill would be financed over many years, and MERA has convened a Finance Subcommittee from among its members to study how best to meet this challenge.