

Marin's 911 alarm: New tax needed to improve radio system

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A new property tax is on Marin County's horizon, and this time it could be a matter of life or death.

Plans for a new parcel tax measure were launched at the Civic Center on Tuesday as public safety officials outlined the need to replace Marin's outdated emergency radio system.

Headed for the November 2014 ballot is an annual parcel tax of \$29 per single family home to finance \$40 million in improvements to the backbone of the county's 911 system.

The system, installed in 1998, is so outdated by new technology that parts are no longer made for it — and other systems must be "cannibalized" before repairs proceed.

In addition, the dispatch and radio system linking local agencies includes dead or "radio free" zones in Tiburon, Wolfback Ridge above Sausalito, Tomales and between Stinson Beach and Muir Beach.

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority, a coalition of 25 public agencies including the county and all its cities, operates a system of 17 base station radio and receiver sites linking dispatch centers and mobile units.

"The biggest issue facing the agency is planning ahead so we can respond to 911 calls," said County Administrator Matthew Hymel, a board member of the authority.

Hymel added the authority has little choice other than seeking new revenue because some agency budgets could not afford their share of the cost. The county alone would face radio system costs rising from \$800,000 a year, to about \$2 million a year in the absence of new tax revenue.

Surveys indicated that initial plans for a \$45 measure would not draw the two-thirds voter approval needed, but that \$29 would be more politically palatable. Voter sentiment also favored a parcel tax over a sales tax hike or general obligation bond.

The parcel tax would raise \$3.6 million a year for 20 years, enabling the authority to pay for bond service and install a system in five years. Improvements include four new antennas — in Tomales, Tiburon, Wolfback Ridge and near Stinson Beach or Muir Beach — as part of a \$14.6 million radio system and a \$3.6 million microwave system. Other costs include \$12 million in mobile radios and \$9.9 million in site development, licensing and environmental analysis. Cost estimates were inflated 25 percent to reflect contingencies.

"The lifeblood behind any emergency is our ability to communicate," said county Fire Chief Jason Weber, who outlined the radio program for county supervisors at a workshop session that included the airing of a promotional video, "When Seconds Save Lives."

Weber said the county's current radio system is in sad shape, with "critical infrastructure near failure." Designed for 1,580 mobile radios with expansion capacity for 2,500, it now serves 2,897, doesn't cover all areas of the county and lacks a supply of parts, he said.

County supervisors, acting on behalf of the authority, will decide formally next summer whether to place the matter on the ballot.

"I suggest we familiarize the broader community way early," Supervisor Katie Rice said of the program. Supervisor Judy Arnold suggested stories of accident and crisis survivors be broadcast to underscore the value of communications systems.

The informal county session was the first of 25 presentations by Weber and others as officials detail the program for agencies who are members of the radio authority.

"This is the beginning of a long journey," Supervisor Steve Kinsey noted.

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At A Glance

Headed for the November 2014 ballot is an annual parcel tax of \$29 per single family home to finance \$40 million in improvements to the backbone of the county's emergency radio system. First installed in 1998, the aging technology is nearing failure, authorities say. A formal decision on whether to seek the tax will be made next summer.