

Marin Emergency Radio Authority Project Oversight Committee Meeting

Proposed Revisions to the Outreach Plan and Budget

Prepared for POC meeting March 7, 2014
Presented by Dan Mullen and Terry Price

Executive Summary

- The January 2014 survey revealed we're still short of the 2/3rds support needed for passage.
- Further reduction in the project's cost to achieve a lower parcel tax assessment would not improve public acceptance.
- To be successful, MERA must educate Marin residents of the need and urgency of this project.
- Educating the public requires more than community meetings originally conceived in the Outreach Plan. We need to increase the public's knowledge of MERA's mission and services.
- At the end of the proposed revised public education campaign, it is recommended that a final brushfire poll be conducted.
- This request to increase the previously approved budget will invest in an expanded public education effort using a variety of approaches.

Where We Are Now In The Outreach Plan

The Round 1 presentations were effective at sharing the Next Gen system information with our membership, extended councils and Board of Supervisors. Also, the 2013 polling results provided MERA with helpful data on how to revise the Next Gen Project to be more acceptable to the public. This resulted in changes to the proposed measure ballot language that we anticipated would increase the level of support. However, the January 2014 survey shows us coming up shy of having the two-thirds needed to pass a parcel tax.

This puts MERA at a crossroads. The segment of voters who "don't know" if they would support this measure are relatively small, plus they are spread out across the county and various demographic groups. This makes it harder to target just one geographic or demographic area and be successful. In light of this challenge, we are making several recommendations below on how to update our Outreach Plan to put MERA in a better position to be successful with a November ballot measure.

Survey Results

The results from the second survey conducted January 26-29 2014 were not as positive as we hoped. Changes to the ballot language – including the lowering of the \$29 per single family home, more

references to 911, decreasing response times and the inclusion of a citizens' oversight and low-income senior exemption – earned a modest increase in support. However, any gains from these changes to the ballot measure language were likely offset by the 8% drop in public concern about “maintaining reliable communications during a disaster” (from 49% in 2013 to 41% this year). In short, additional changes to the language will not be enough to win passage.

The 62% total ‘yes’ support, while strong, does not meet the two-thirds supermajority necessary for passage. This, plus the 28% who reported they are either ‘definitely no’ or ‘probably no’, indicates there is an urgent need for more public education than is currently approved as budgeted by MERA if we are to pass this measure.

Our pollster concluded that:

- Passing a parcel tax to finance improvements and upgrades to Marin County’s emergency communication system will be challenging given the two-thirds vote threshold.
- Changes to the ballot label have helped increase support, but they do not appear sufficient.
- An active education and communications effort is required to increase overall awareness of the threats to emergency communications across the county from natural disasters, and how system upgrades will also improve general 911 emergency communications.
- The absence of such communications will significantly reduce the likelihood of a measure passing.

Targeting

While the survey results are not what we wanted to see, there are opportunities that would be effective in an expanded public education effort, including:

- Communicate the Need for and Benefits of 911 Emergency Communications: Concerns about reliable emergency communications have diminished over the past year. Voters not concerned about communications during emergencies (down 8% in 2014) see little reason to vote “yes” – this slice of voters could make the difference. Persuadable respondents are heavily influenced by the reduction of 911 response times and reliable emergency communications during a natural disaster. The public also does not currently connect MERA or this measure with 911 emergency communications.
- Geography: San Rafael voters are particularly supportive and Novato voters more skeptical. In Supervisorial District 3 (Southern Marin), we see 13% undecided. This is our largest area for pick-up, but it is likely not enough to pass countywide. We need to educate other persuadable voters in D1, D2 and D4 in order to raise our support over two-thirds.
- Swing Voters: The “Swing” vote of 22% consists of women, independents, older residents, renters and household incomes under \$75,000/yr.

We want to use the above information to target persuadable residents with focused and repeated messaging.

Our New Three-Part Strategy

The previously approved strategy of tax price reduction, ballot language changes, in-person presentations, some digital media and an updated video will not be sufficient to put us into position to win at the ballot

box. We need to educate residents directly about the urgent need to maintain robust and reliable emergency communications. Furthermore, the nature of where these undecided voters reside, namely across the entire county and various demographic groups, means we have to reach out to multiple groups, multiple times, in order to deliver our message to those less informed residents who are interspersed among everyone else.

This unexpected polling result leads us to recommending a course correction:

- Share this information with the Marin County Board of Supervisors to ensure they remain supportive of placing a measure on the November ballot.
- Enlist the support of more police and fire chiefs as well as rank-and-file safety personnel to tell the BOS of their strong support for this project and the need to help educate the public.
- Expand public education effort to address the knowledge gaps identified in the most recent poll. This would be followed by a brief tracking poll in June to test if the public education program succeeded. The decision to put this on the fall ballot will be made in July.

Revisions to the Outreach Plan's Goal and Objectives

Below are the Goal and Objectives as stated in the current Outreach Plan. MERA has achieved Objective 1 and is well on its way to achieving Objectives 2 & 3 (overwhelming if not unanimous). A revision to the Objective 4 is required.

Goal – Achieve next generation system funding through the passage of a parcel tax bond measure.

Objectives:

- Educate our membership and community leaders
 - Obtain unanimous support of MERA representatives
 - Obtain unanimous support from member organizations
 - (Current) -To the extent possible, educate Marin citizens
4. *(Proposed) – Educate Marin citizens about how MERA is a vital component of the 911 emergency response system by providing responsive and reliable communications during natural disasters and emergencies, as well as educate the public about the demands on the communications system that require it to be upgraded and modernized.*

Updated Activities and Budget Narrative

Below are the activities we expect to run as part of an expanded public education program to ensure we have the support necessary to place the MERA Next Gen System measure on the November 2014 ballot. This section doubles as a budget narrative, with the budget request in parentheses at the end of each line item. The previously approved budget and new revised totals are also shown in a grid in the next section.

Consulting

As part of our continuing advisory role to MERA, we would work with MERA's Executive Officer, Special Project Manager, Administrative Assistant and other staff to ensure all the outreach activities roll out as planned, and to respond to any new developments as necessary. This includes an updated Round 2 presentation to reflect new message framing, plus all of the new activities suggested below. (\$68,000)

This also includes an expanded earned media program to expand outreach and engagement to these outlets:

- Marin Independent Journal
- Pacific Sun
- Marinscope Newspapers
- Content creation supplied for:
 - Newsletters for POAs, PMAs, FFAs and every other stakeholder in MERA
 - Civic organizations like Rotary, Lions, etc.
 - Other websites and blogs, including all of MERA's members, city councils, agencies, etc.

Legal Counsel

Given the special circumstances of this ballot measure, how it impacts public safety and the government code used, and the expanded public education campaign we're seeking – we're asking for a small amount of advise from MERA's counsel to ensure we're doing everything 'by the book.' (New line item - \$2,000)

Website

While originally we thought we would take the existing MERA website and re-make the home page to be more user friendly for the average resident, the recent polling has given us pause. As part of a new, broader campaign, we're recommending that we create a new website from scratch for this project. This avoids the possible confusion among MERA members looking for old materials, and also gives us more leeway to determine design, messaging and framing that most benefits our new public education campaign. (No change in budgeted amount)

Video Production & Cable Buy

Video is our best medium to share real life stories and connect residents to the need for MERA services during emergencies and natural disasters. We will retain specialists to assist with the concept, development and production of video for all paid media (traditional or online). They will also make sure to produce every element of the product transparently, creatively, and strategically. (Production increase \$5,000, TV Buy \$100,000)

Digital Outreach and Placement

This was originally planned to be Facebook and Google search ads that drove viewers to our redesigned website. In our new plan, we're now proposing a low-cost, high volume option that is sustained over 8 weeks to maximize impressions. (Increase of \$34,200)

Direct Mail Program

In an era of increasingly scattered viewership across multiple screens (tv, computers, mobile), we use high-impact direct mail as a static reinforcement of our messaging. It allows us to cover a wide variety of issues and questions, while still presenting the information in a factual and digestible form for the reader. It also gets us into their home, on the kitchen table and keeps us around for as long as they'll have us. Locally, print media has long been the dominant medium by which voters receive their information about important local civic issues. (New line item \$90,000)

Final Brushfire Survey #3

In addition, it is recommended we conduct a final, limited tracking poll to assess the results of the public education effort, to be completed and presented before the deadline for placement of the measure on the November ballot. (\$12,250)

Budget Revision for Expanded Public Education

Listed below are recommended budget revisions which include the previously approved expenses plus newly anticipated expenses for this fiscal year (FY) and next fiscal year to educate the public about MERA and it's mission. Once approved, the new budget and activities will be incorporated into the Outreach Plan.

FY 2013-14

EXPENDITURE	Approved G.B. 5/15/13	Revised G.B. 12/11/13	Proposed Revised
Consulting	\$102,000	\$60,000	\$68,000
Legal Counsel on Public Information Campaigns		\$0	\$2,000
Website	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000
Video, Editing & Production	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$10,000
Video/TV Public Education – 6 weeks		\$0	\$100,000
Digital/Web		\$5,000	\$39,200
Tracking Public Survey #2 (completed)	\$16,000	\$16,000	\$15,250
Mailer #1 – introduction, testimonials, promote online info		\$0	\$39,500
Mailer #2 –message to Southern Marin		\$0	\$11,000
Mailer #3 – selected FAQ & testimonials		\$0	\$39,500
Print Materials Graphic Design	4,000		(included in other line items)
Final Brushfire Survey #3		\$0	\$12,250
TOTAL*	\$132,000	\$91,000	\$341,700**

** Totals do not include the cost of the SPM and AA, which is a separate line item under the direction and management of the Executive Officer. That said, we do not anticipate significant differences in their time allocation, given this plan revision is for paid media and some more consulting expenses.*

*** An increase of \$209,700 from the G.B. budget approved 5/15/13.*

FY 2014-15 (July – November)

EXPENDITURE	Requested for FY 2014-15
Consulting	\$12,000
Digital/Web	\$2,000
TOTAL	\$14,000

Updated Timeline

We are recommending a tight, but achievable, timeline in order to maintain the momentum we've already built among stakeholders and position us for success in the coming months.

Some of these dates, such as the May 14 Executive Board meeting requesting the BOS consider the ballot measure, may need to be pushed back by a short period (1-3 weeks) to allow for the public education plan to unfold fully.

March

- March 7 – POC meeting:
Review and provide guidance and/or approval of this Public Education Plan
- March 12 – Executive Board meeting
- Public Education begins on: Website, TV
- Round 2 presentations begin

April

- Early April – Presentation #2 to City Managers & their Finance people, given by MERA's Dave, Matthew, Tech and Finance
- Round 2 presentations continue
- Public Education on: Digital placement, Mail Program
- April 7 – New Website Launches
- Early April – TV spot(s) go on air
- April 10 – Mailer #1 drops
- April 22 – Mailer #2 drops
- Round 2 presentations continue

May

- Round 2 presentations end
- May 5 – Mailer #3 drops
- May 7 – Executive Board meeting
- May 14 – Governing Board meeting:
Resolution requesting County ballot measure
- Late May – Brushfire Survey #3
(might need to move May 7 E-Bd and/or May 14 G-Bd meeting(s) to later dates if they need to consider the polling results before requesting the ballot placement of BOS.)

June

- June 17 – public notice on resolution to levy parcel tax (BOS)

July

- July 8 – BOS decides on placing measure on Nov. ballot (may need to move later)
- July 9 – Executive Board meeting

August

- Aug. 8 – Last day to submit Resolution and Ballot Language to Registrar of Voters
- Aug. 18 – Last day to submit ballot arguments
- Aug. 25 – Last day to submit rebuttal arguments