

MARIN EMERGENCY RADIO AUTHORITY

c/o Novato Fire Protection District
95 Rowland Way, Novato, CA 94945
PHONE: (415) 878-2690 FAX: (415) 878-2660
www.meraonline.org

DATE: March 9, 2016
TO: MERA Executive Board
FROM: Maureen Cassingham, Executive Officer

SUBJECT: AGENDA ITEM **B-3**: REQUEST FROM MARIN COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION (MCOE): MERA RADIOS FOR MCOE AND DISTRICT OFFICES

Recommended Action: Appoint a Subcommittee of the Executive Board to meet with representatives of the Marin County Office of Education to initiate the vetting process for the request from MCOE for MERA radios, dated February 22, 2016.

Background: Discussions regarding the Schools' use of the MERA System date back to 1999 when a proposal from MERA was presented to MCOE outlining parameters and costs. Since my first meeting with Superintendent Burke and Assistant Superintendent McCann in January 2008 on MCOE's System use, issuance of the 2007-2008 Marin Grand Jury "Emergency Communications at Marin Schools": A Tale of Catastrophe dated 3-13-2008, and MERA's response to same, there has been ongoing, albeit sporadic, interaction between MCOE and MERA representatives about this. Those exchanges have touched on current System capacity, extent of MCOE usage, radio costs, development of the Next Gen System, etc.

Attached is MCOE's latest request of MERA for 400 radios, 20 for each of the 19 Districts plus the District Office, along with an update on the current status of the Marin Schools' Emergency Radio Network.

To better understand MCOE's latest request and develop a plan for further technical, operational and member review, the Executive Board is asked to appoint a 3-member Subcommittee to meet with MCOE representatives, followed by a proposed vetting process prior to Executive and Governing Board consideration.

ATTACHMENT: Includes the following:
Marin County of Education – Letter of Request - Dated 2/22/16
Correspondence between Mary Jane Burke and Martin Nichols –
Dated 4/22/03
Memorandum to Karin Hern from Maureen Cassingham – Dated 6/9/08



MARIN COUNTY
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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SAN RAFAEL, CA 94913-4925
marincoe@marinschools.org

MARY JANE BURKE
MARIN COUNTY
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

(415) 472-4110
FAX (415) 491-6625

February 22, 2016

Richard Pearce
President, MERA Board of Directors
c/o Novato Fire Protection District
95 Rowland Way
Novato, CA 94945

Dear Mr. Pearce,

We are writing to request consideration of the MERA Executive Board to include Marin County's School Districts in the MERA system through the allocation of 20 MERA handheld radios for each District Office, and at the Marin County Office of Education. This request is made with the understanding that each district would pay for the cost of the radio.

This request comes at a time when the Marin Schools Emergency Radio Network is no longer fully functioning due to the age of the system components and radios that are no longer supported. Since 1987 our Marin County Schools have operated an 800 MgH emergency radio system, originally repurposed from school buses that were no longer in operation. With technical support from the Marin County Radio Shop, monthly tests of the system have been performed during the school year for almost 30 years. Over the past 18 months communications have been deteriorating, with significant work performed at the Big Rock repeater and a recent failure of the base station at the Marin County Office of Education. The system is now unable to link the following school districts to the Marin Schools Emergency Network:

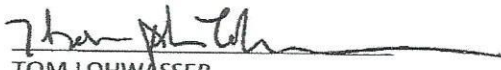
- Bolinas-Stinson Union School District
- Dixie School District
- Kentfield School District
- Laguna Joint School District
- Lagunitas School District
- Larkspur-Corte Madera School District
- Nicasio School District
- Novato Unified School District
- Ross School District
- San Rafael City Schools
- Shoreline Unified School District
- Union Joint School District

The maintenance and operation of a reliable emergency communication system between our schools that will allow us to communicate during a regional emergency when land lines, cell towers and Internet communications may be down remains a critical priority, as we care for some of the most vulnerable in our community. With schools also identified as emergency shelters, evacuation centers and transportation resources - we know that it is vital to address this emergency communications link in the most effective way with our community public safety partners.

The mission of MERA, to effectively and efficiently facilitate critical emergency communication, and the vision to enhance the safety of citizens, are so important to our community. We see inclusion of our school districts in the MERA system as a central and vital step in that mission.

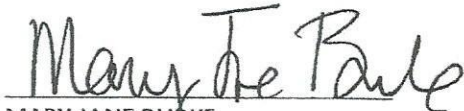
Thank you so much for your consideration, and for the important work that you do to support our public safety.

Sincerely,



TOM LOHWASSER

President, Marin Association of Superintendents



MARY JANE BURKE

Marin County Superintendent of Schools

Cc: Matthew Hymel, Vice-President and Chair
MERA Executive Committee

MARIN EMERGENCY RADIO AUTHORITY

27 Commercial Blvd., Suite C, Novato, CA 94949

Phone: (415) 883-9100 FAX: (415) 883-9155

April 22, 2003

Mary Jane Burke
Marin County Superintendent of Schools
P.O. Box 4925
San Rafael, CA 94913-4925

RE: Adoption of Equipment for Schools and Use of MERA System

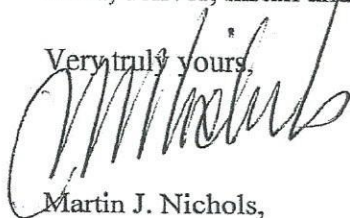
Dear Superintendent Burke:

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) at the meeting of April 17, 2003, approved a policy whereby Marin County schools, both public and private, could obtain MERA equipment. The policy adopted by the Board of Directors provides:

1. MERA radios will be made available to schools for use of emergency drills and emergency events only
2. The schools or the local MERA agency will buy the needed equipment. There will be no cost for this equipment paid by MERA.
3. There will be no operating cost apportioned to the schools districts for the use of this equipment.

Mr. McCann will continue to work with Mr. Chuck, the MERA Project Engineer, to determine the appropriate equipment for the individual schools, its cost and the procedures necessary to order, deliver, install and train on the new equipment.

Very truly yours,



Martin J. Nichols,
Executive Officer

MJN/mel

cc: Richard Chuck

Improving School Emergency Radio Communications in Marin

Background

Marin County has 19 separate school districts that have School Emergency Preparedness Plans identifying emergency communication as a priority.

The current protocol for emergency communication has local schools communicating, by various methods, to their district office and local public safety. During a major emergency, the district office has a protocol of using the Marin Schools Emergency Radio Network to notify the Marin County Office of Education. The Marin County Office of Education then reports information on the condition of schools to the County EOC.

This current system has several flaws.

"School to district" communications rely on land line phones and cell phones in most districts and is not interoperable with public safety communications or MERA.

"District to Marin County Office of Education" through the Marin Schools Emergency Radio Network is not interoperable with public safety communications or MERA.

Marin Schools Emergency Radio Network equipment and infrastructure is outdated.

The current system can be improved.

Goal - Marin County schools will have an emergency communications system such as MERA or one that permits interoperability to better provide for the safety of students and staff during times of major emergency.

With this goal in mind and with the understanding that Marin County schools are responsible for funding and maintaining its MERA equipment, and that use of the system is limited to monthly drills and emergency use as per the April 22, 2003 letter from Marin Emergency Radio Authority Executive Officer (attachment #1), we have developed a **Preliminary Plan for Improving School Emergency Radio Communications** (attachment #2).

Preliminary Plan for Improving School Emergency Radio Communication

Timeline	Activity	Goals	Responsibility	Technical Support
Phase I Short Term (90 days)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expedite MCOE Central Office and Walker Creek Ranch on MERA as a mutual aid user. Survey all school districts on their current school to district Emergency Communication Systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot MERA use by a school agency. Provide interoperable communication from MCOE to EOC. Develop baseline information to plan improvements as needed with public safety. 	MCOE	MERA Approval Marin County Radio Shop
Phase II Mid Term (12 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perform assessment of current school to district communication systems as needed. Strengthen school to district communications where needed. Establish remaining 18 school districts on MERA as mutual aid users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve school to district communications. All school district offices able to have interoperable communication with local public safety and MCOE. 	School Districts MCOE	Local Public Safety MERA Approval Marin County Radio Shop/Consultant
Phase III Long Term (12-24 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Move schools on to MERA system if needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seamless system of interoperable emergency communications for schools. 	School Districts MCOE	MERA Approval Marin County Radio Shop

MARIN EMERGENCY RADIO AUTHORITY
371 Bel Marin Keys Blvd., Suite 100, Novato, CA 94949
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 9, 2008
TO: Karin Hern, Grand Jury Committee Chair
FROM: Maureen Cassingham, Executive Officer
SUBJECT: MERA BOARD OF DIRECTORS RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY FINDINGS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS – 2007-2008 MARIN COUNTY GRAND JURY
“EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS AT MARIN SCHOOLS: A TALE OF
CATASTROPHE” REPORT DATED MARCH 13, 2008

On June 5, 2008, the Marin Emergency Radio Authority Board of Directors approved the attached response to the findings and recommendations in the above Grand Jury report at a publicly noticed meeting. Please contact me should you have questions.

Attachments

GRAND JURY FINDINGS

- F1: MERA began as a communications system for first responders for use in emergencies.

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority, per its joint powers agreement, was formed “to plan, finance, implement, manage, own, and operate a multi-jurisdictional, county-wide public-safety, public-services, and emergency radio system” for use by its member agencies including law enforcement, fire management, emergency medical, public works maintenance, transit, local government, and other public service agencies in Marin County.

- F2: MERA has evolved into a general network embracing most of Marin’s public service and public safety day-to-day communications. Emergencies are one segment of its function.

The MERA system continues to function, per its original purpose, as “a multi-jurisdictional, county-wide public safety, public service and emergency radio system” for use by its member agencies.

- F3: No public or private school in Marin is part of MERA.

In 1999, MERA offered the Marin County Office of Education, on behalf of all schools in their jurisdiction, an opportunity to participate as a mutual aid agency and a waiver of their share of system construction (estimated 1999 dollar value – \$60,000) provided they purchase their own radios and participate in extensive radio training as did all MERA members. To date, this offer has not been accepted.

- F4: Marin County is a likely candidate for a major disaster at any time.

All counties in the State of California, including Marin County, are candidates for a major disaster at any time.

- F5: The present public-school emergency radio communications system is about to go belly-up, leaving the schools with no emergency radio communications capabilities.

The present public-school emergency radio system is operational but aging and in need of replacement. Every communications system, whatever its condition, is susceptible to being compromised in a disaster.

- F7: Money for Homeland Security grants for MERA radios in the schools has not been made available because of questionable interpretations of Homeland Security guidelines by local authorities.

MERA is supportive of the County Office of Education’s efforts to seek external funding. MERA is unaware of any questionable interpretations of Homeland Security funding guidelines.

GRAND JURY FINDINGS (continued)

- F8: Money has been the stumbling block for MERA radios in the schools. The immediate need for an emergency radio communications system for Marin schools has been trumped by the lack of financing and what seems to be a widespread attitude that puts money before school safety.

Since 1999, MERA has offered to waive the County Office of Education's share of system construction/expense (estimated 1999 dollar value – \$60,000) to facilitate their participation in the system. This is a considerable ongoing financial commitment on the part of its member agencies in the interest of school safety. MERA has also provided technical assistance to aid Marin schools in evaluating other emergency communications options.

- F10: There is a belief that installing MERA radios now could instill a false sense of security in the schools, because in any major crisis, the MERA system would be overwhelmed, with any immediate help unlikely in spite of MERA.

As a matter of best practices, reliance on any one communications system in a crisis is unwise. Alternative systems should be identified and utilized as fallback in the event of primary system failure. MERA, like any other communications system, can be overloaded, which is why other communications options will be utilized as backup.

- F11: An alternate plan to equip the schools with an emergency radio communications system that could be outside the MERA radio network is in an early state of consideration.

MERA's Communications Engineer has provided communications alternatives to the Marin County Office of Education and is awaiting the schools' input on their operating requirements to provide additional technical assistance.

GRAND JURY RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1: The Board of Supervisors, the Marin Emergency Radio Authority, the Disaster Council, the Marin County Office of Education, the Marin County Office of Emergency Services, the Marin County Department of Public Works, the Marin County Administrator's Office, the Marin County Department of Health & Human Services, the various public-school districts, and the private schools should immediately work together to fund and install the MERA system and its radios in all of Marin's public and private schools.

MERA continues to be proactive in facilitating Marin schools' emergency communications by offering to fund their share of MERA system construction costs and by providing technical assistance in evaluating other communications alternatives. MERA will work cooperatively with other agencies in the County to help identify resources to fund the cost of radios, should the Office of Education opt to use the MERA system.

- R2: In the event it is determined that MERA is not a feasible option for Marin's schools, an effective, alternative emergency radio communication network, independent of MERA, should be immediately modeled, funded, and installed in Marin's public and private schools through the collective efforts of the entities identified in Recommendation R1.

MERA is currently providing technical assistance to the Marin County Office of Education on alternative communications systems. MERA will work cooperatively with other agencies in the County to assist the County Office of Education in identifying funding sources to implement an alternative to the MERA system, if it is determined to be more feasible.