

Marin Voice: MERA is making headway in emergency radio upgrade

By Richard Pearce and Dave Jeffries

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In our combined 66 years in public safety, we've learned that reliable communication tools are critical to the security of the residents we're sworn to protect.

When residents dial 911, they need to know that the system can help our public safety workers respond to any emergency.

In November 2014, Marin County voters approved a parcel tax to support the development of an updated radio communication system for first responders. There is a lot of progress to report.

First, the basics: Twenty-five agencies belong to the Marin Emergency Radio Authority, or MERA. All of Marin's law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services rely on MERA to enable rapid response and coordination for emergency needs. The MERA system provides Marin agencies their first true multi-agency, multi-discipline system to support not only day-to-day operations but the mutual aid capabilities we need to enable local agencies to work together efficiently during time-sensitive emergencies.

Although it has worked well since it was designed in 1998, it is aging and approaching obsolescence.

Prior to the 2014 election, MERA staff delivered presentations to all 25 MERA member councils and boards as well as to community groups. MERA decided to move forward with plans for a new system, which we're calling the Next Generation Public Safety Voice Radio System, for several key reasons:

- **Reliability.** The original system is experiencing component malfunctions. Replacement equipment is either no longer manufactured or being phased out.
- **Capacity.** MERA has nearly 2,900 users today on a system originally designed for 1,580. The system must expand capacity to eliminate busy signals during major emergencies and add mutual aid partners. The Next Gen system is planned for 5,000 users.
- **Coverage.** Some areas of Marin have limited radio coverage, which can result in longer response times for public safety personnel. The Next Gen system will include the addition of new tower sites.
- **Loss of radio frequencies.** Existing federal legislation will require that we give back our current radio frequencies in 2021, forcing a move to new frequencies.

Since the election, MERA has worked diligently to implement the new system. MERA selected Federal Engineering in July 2015 to help guide the selection of a vendor for the Next Gen system. Federal Engineering has been busy reviewing our current radio sites and areas where MERA would like to improve radio reception.

Federal has developed guidance on strategies to extend the life of the Next Gen system, and reviewed current and expected coverage scenarios in preparation for soliciting vendor bids in May 2016 for the MERA Next Gen System.

The request for proposals is a key next step. By late summer, MERA will be reviewing proposals with the intent of having a vendor selected by the end of the calendar year. After that critical milestone, we will focus on detailed design and implementation.

We want the new system operational by the end of 2018.

A Citizens Oversight Committee has been selected and will be reviewing the use of the parcel tax proceeds. The committee includes one member from each supervisorial district selected from citizens who are subject to the parcel tax.

We appreciate the countywide support for this critical project.

We would like to remind the community that there is a low-income senior exemption to the MERA parcel tax. Requests for exemption must be filed annually no later than June 1 of each year.

For more information about MERA, visit meraonline.org.

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