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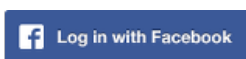
PUBLISHED: OCTOBER 23, 2014 12:01 AM EST
UPDATED: OCTOBER 23, 2014 8:15 AM EST

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Proposed \$26 million public safety radio system looms large in county budget proposal

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McKean Hose Co. Fire Chief Jim Pyle was photographed Oct. 13 with the two different emergency radios he needed to use when he was in command of a McKean Township fire scene (background) at Countryside Estates that occurred on Oct. 2 where a woman was seriously burned. Pyle, 57, said he needed to use two different radios because different responding fire companies operate on different frequencies. Pyle stressed that communication issues didn't hamper rescue efforts at this scene, but county officials are currently proposing a new \$26.4 million system that would put all emergency responders on one radio network. CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE//ERIE TIMES-NEWS

On the afternoon of Oct. 2, Jim Pyle lived through another example of what he considers the fractured, potentially dangerous radio communications system that many local public safety responders deal with.

Pyle, chief of the McKean Hose Co., was in command at a roaring mobile home fire in the Countrywide Estates mobile home park, off Bargain Road in McKean Township. The blaze would engulf the mobile home within five minutes and leave a woman badly burned.

Firefighters from another volunteer unit, the West Ridge Fire Department in Millcreek Township, helped McKean's crews battle the fire. Pyle, though, had a difficult time talking with them because the two departments use hand-held radios that operate on different frequencies.

Pyle said it's a common occurrence with many emergency responders countywide, and a longtime issue for public safety workers across the country.

"Millcreek departments all operate off a higher UHF frequency. County (volunteer) departments communicate and are dispatched on a low band frequency," said Pyle, 57, a volunteer firefighter for 40 years. "Unless there's a mechanism to connect them, you don't have the ability to talk. I have two hand-held radios, one high band and one low band, but it's inefficient.

"I've had five structure fires in the past two years where this has been an issue. ... I'm 10 feet away from (another department's) trucks, and I can't talk to them," Pyle said. "It's endangering firefighters. It's endangering the general public. Using the system we have now, someone's going to get injured or killed."

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'Minutes are precious'

Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper has similar concerns -- and that's the primary reason for one of the most

expensive items in her proposed \$96.3 million county budget for 2015.

Dahlkemper wants Erie County Council to sign off on using \$10.5 million in county reserve funds to pay for a new \$26.4 million "next generation" radio system for the region's emergency responders. The system would allow local emergency responders to communicate on common frequencies and replace the fragmented system they now use.

"Minutes are precious when we're talking about people's lives," Dahlkemper said in a recent interview. "And we need to make sure that people can communicate."

Dahlkemper's proposal: use the \$10.5 million to make debt payments for at least the first five years of a 20-year capital improvement bond to fund the radio system.

McMurray-based MCM Consulting Group, which was paid \$65,190 by county government to study the issue, recommends creating "a common platform of operation by locating all agencies into a single band of UHF radio frequencies." MCM's report, released publicly last week, states: "Erie County does not have a countywide radio system. It has a system of systems" that are inefficient.

MCM recommends that Erie County replace the current radio, microwave and radio console equipment and systems as soon as possible because they are so crucial to public safety.

The proposal includes 20 communication towers throughout Erie County over seven primary communication zones, with the city of Erie and Millcreek Township -- the two most populous municipalities -- being their own zones.

The system could be up and running by 2017.

"A failure in these vital systems cannot be tolerated," MCM's report states.

Dahlkemper said county government should take the lead on implementing the radio system, and that local officials balked at implementing a long-term solution for years because of the huge costs involved.

In addition, Dahlkemper said, other Pennsylvania counties in recent years have decided to pay for upgrades to their public safety communications systems.

For example, officials in Lawrence County are making plans to borrow \$20 million for a variety of projects, including an upgrade of the county's emergency radio system, a new public safety center and improvements at the Lawrence County Courthouse. County Commissioners there, in August, approved a 20-year bond issue to pay for the project.

And in York County, commissioners there approved a \$27 million 911 radio system project in June aimed at upgrading and modifying that countywide system. Work is scheduled to begin in March.

John Grappy, the county's public safety director, said that for years the local public safety community could not come to a consensus on how best to tackle the communications issue.

That is no longer the case, Grappy said.

"There needs to be a common frequency for public safety radio systems," Grappy said. "Everyone realizes ... the current systems are unreliable. They need to be replaced."

But at what cost?

County Council Chairman Kyle Foust said that is the key question he and his colleagues will wrestle with during budget deliberations, which began this week. County Council is expected to adopt the 2015 budget on Nov. 18.

Budget considerations

Foust said he believes it's time to replace the radio system, which currently sees some departments using 1970s technology, which manufacturers no longer maintain.

However, Foust is concerned about how county government pays that bill over time.

"Whatever we get in terms of a system ... we need to commit to how we're going to pay for it long term," Foust said, adding that Dahlkemper's proposal does not specify how debt payments would be made after the first five years.

"We just can't say we're going to figure it out later," Foust said.

Dahlkemper said she hopes that other funding sources, including grants and private funds from businesses and foundations, could help pay for the new radio system. If that doesn't happen, Dahlkemper admitted that roughly \$2.1 million in yearly radio system debt would likely be paid with taxpayer dollars from the county's general fund budget.

Dahlkemper also said that her administration and County Council must talk about whether affected municipalities, police agencies, volunteer fire departments and ambulance companies in Erie County would be asked to help fund the radio system.

"What would that look like? What would that formula be?" Dahlkemper said. "Those are all things that would require a much bigger discussion."

Pyle, McKean Hose Co.'s chief, wants to be part of that conversation. He also hopes that Dahlkemper's budget proposal finally brings a much-needed fix.

"I wouldn't mind chipping in, I just don't know what the dollar amount would be," Pyle said. "I don't know everything that's going to go through and get approved on all this. What I do know, though, is I've told the county executive personally that the way we have it now is not working."

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[Erie County Pa. Next Generation Radio System Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan Report](#) by [MattMartin](#)