



## News - Local News

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# County Council to meet with consultant again on radio project

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Erie County Council Chairman Kyle Foust wants to make one thing clear: he and most of council's seven members support establishing a new, multimillion-dollar state-of-the-art radio system for local emergency responders.

County Council, however, is wrestling with the best way to pay for it.

That is a major reason why the panel plans to meet with the county's radio system consultant Dec. 16 to ask more questions about financing, equipment and the project's probable timeline.

Foust asked for the meeting with Michael McGrady, chief executive of McMurray-based MCM Consulting Group Inc. The meeting will be at the Erie County Courthouse.

Council members have met in smaller groups with McGrady about the radio project, which would allow local emergency responders to communicate on common frequencies and replace the fragmented system they now use. The system's estimated cost is \$26.4 million.

Each council member also has attended at least one of the series of public meetings held countywide in recent weeks on the radio system.

However, Foust said he believes it's beneficial for the entire panel to meet with McGrady once again to discuss "the building of the system and the financing."

Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper, as part of her \$96.3 million county budget for 2015, wanted County Council to agree to use \$10.5 million in county reserve funds to help pay for the radio system.

However, council did not include that funding in the budget, which was passed Nov. 18. Council members said they want to have more specific discussions with Dahlkemper's administration about how the radio system will be paid for.

"It's going to be a pretty big commitment on the county's part, and I think we're all relatively comfortable with that," Foust said. "But let's have one other opportunity with (McGrady) before we go forward."

McGrady led a \$65,190 county-funded study of the issue. He has said that the current system in use countywide, which includes both high-band and low-band frequencies, is "an interoperability nightmare" that should be scrapped and replaced with a more reliable option as soon as 2017.

Various departments and emergency responders across the county use hand-held radios that operate on different frequencies, which makes it difficult -- or often impossible -- for them to communicate with each other during an emergency.

Many local officials believe the situation is potentially life-threatening. Spotty radio communication also has been a longtime issue for public safety workers nationwide.

McGrady, in an interview last week, said he anticipates plenty of questions about equipment and the radio network "infrastructure," and he's happy to talk to council about it.

"They want to know more about what makes up the system -- the radio equipment, consoles, towers, antennas, receivers -- and why that costs what it costs," McGrady said. "We can give them a breakdown of all of that. And I don't blame them. If I were the one paying for it, I'd want to know all of that, too."

Foust said he wants to know whether the equipment MCM is recommending for the system "is the top of the line."

He also wants to talk about how the county could come up with a financing plan that lets it pay for the radio system within seven to 10 years.

Dahlkemper had originally talked about paying for the system over 20 years via a long-term capital improvement bond.

"I think a shorter term is more favorable to the long-term finances of the county," Foust said.

During one of his two tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army nearly a decade ago, Councilman Jay Breneman was charged with setting up radio communications in the field -- systems similar to the one the county is talking about.

Breneman said he welcomes the meeting with McGrady because it gives council a chance to discuss "multiple financing options" for the system.

"That's what I want to see. Other counties who have these systems have done some creative things to help fund it, like using sales taxes and impact fees," Breneman said. "I want to see more than one financing option on the table."

"My experience has taught me that these systems save people's lives. I know we need it and I'm fully supportive of it happening and happening soon," Breneman said. "I've seen communications go out in the field. There can be some very horrible consequences to that."

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