

# Regional first responders team up for radio system

● East Bay firefighters, police close to emergency communication deal

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Preparing for the next disaster, dozens of East Bay public agencies are close to a deal that would allow the region's firefighters and law enforcement to speak on the same radio channels during emergencies.

Today, these agencies in Alameda and Contra Costa counties have limited ability to talk to one another, and at times, they must rely on their dispatchers to relay messages to first responders in the field. It's a Band-Aid approach that gets by for everyday calls between neighboring cities, but it would not fare well in a large-scale earthquake or other crisis, officials said.

"There's a significant delay when you do that," said Contra Costa Fire Chief Keith Richter. "We don't want to have to do relays when the Big One hits."

East Bay fire departments, law enforcement agencies and other public officials plan to hold a news conference Sept. 11 -- the sixth anniversary of the terrorist attacks -- to announce the creation of a joint-powers authority that will oversee the \$100 million radio project.

The first meeting of the 23-member JPA board -- consisting of sheriffs, fire chiefs, city managers, county supervisors and others -- is tentatively scheduled for late September.

The initial phase of the project could be rolled out as early as fall 2008, with the full system ready by 2010, said Bill McCammon, Alameda County's project manager and retired fire chief.

Federal homeland security grants of \$34 million have served as a down payment for the radio system, but project leaders hope to get more grant funding. The infrastructure -- including transmitters and a few new radio towers -- will cost about \$60 million. Each agency will have to chip in for its share of radios, resulting in a collective cost of about \$40 million.

"It's not necessarily new money they have to come up with," McCammon said. "It's just using the money they would have used to replace their old radios anyway."

The system is not limited to firefighters and law enforcement. Public works crews, building inspectors and Caltrans might be needed in disasters, too. Nearly every East Bay city has agreed to participate in the project, as have regional agencies, with the exception of BART.

Seven years ago, the transit system spent \$70 million to replace its communications system, and it is reluctant to spend more money on another radio project, said BART

spokesman Linton Johnson.

"We've given radios out to the cities that touch BART," he said. "People we know who are responding in a terrorist attack or earthquake, they know how to reach us. That said, it would be easier if we were all on the same radio channel."

Today, public safety agencies in the East Bay talk on at least five radio channels that are not compatible with one another. For example, Clayton, Concord, Martinez, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill and Walnut Creek police officers use a frequency that cannot directly communicate with firefighters in their cities.

The California Highway Patrol and East Bay Regional Parks use a different system altogether. The only way these channels can connect is when a technician patches together a "black box" so radio systems can capture other agencies' signals. It's a temporary solution that only works if the agencies are in close proximity to their home base. For example, a Walnut Creek police officer could not communicate when responding to a flood in Fremont.

With the new system, thousands of radios would not necessarily be on exactly the same frequency. A master controller at Alameda County's Emergency Operations Center in Dublin could set up dozens of "talk groups," arranging a cluster of similar agencies on their own channels.

Communication gaps during the 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina underscored the need for regional agencies to develop emergency communication plans. Local disasters, such as the 2004 Walnut Creek pipeline explosion that killed five workers, also show the need for agencies to be on the same frequency, said retired Contra Costa sheriff's Cmdr. Jim Nichols.

"Walnut Creek was unable to talk to different agencies, including us," said Nichols, a radio project consultant. "We're not only lacking in times of these emergencies but also during the day-to-day operations."

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