Daniel Borenstein: Radio bids were not competitive

By Daniel Borenstein
Columnist
Article Launched: 09/06/2008 11:07:13 PM PDT

WHEN YOU GO to buy a television or remodel your house, it's usually a good idea to compare prices. The same applies when government goes shopping with your tax dollars.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen when East Bay counties and cities started buying equipment and constructing a new emergency communications system that by one estimate will cost $110 million. Officials leading the effort to build the East Bay Regional Communications System now admit they erred by not obtaining competitive bids. In the meantime, millions of dollars were wasted.

Even critics of the project agree that the project's goal is a good one: to provide police, firefighters and other emergency officials across Alameda and Contra Costa counties with a radio system that will allow them to talk to each other in times of crisis.

That might seem basic, but the current myriad systems means, for example, that police officers in Clayton, Concord, Martinez, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill and Walnut Creek cannot directly communicate with firefighters in their cities. And Richmond police officers lose communication with their dispatcher when they travel to Martinez to take a prisoner to the county jail.

In Alameda County, Oakland police cannot communicate with their counterparts in neighboring cities or with the Alameda County Sheriff's Department.

In the East Bay, no incident better demonstrated the dangers of poor cross-agency communication better than the 1991 Oakland Hills fire in which firefighters from surrounding communities responded, but couldn't radio each other. Elsewhere in the country, communication gaps during 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina highlighted the need for universal communication systems.

As a result, the federal government has made millions of dollars available for upgrading radio systems. But the story of how the money has been spent so far in the East Bay is a bit troubling.

The program was spearheaded by Alameda County, which sought in 2005 to upgrade its radio system. Recognizing that the program would be more likely to receive federal homeland security funding if it included a regional approach, the county also asked for a proposal to link the communication systems throughout the East Bay.

But the county received only one bid, from Motorola. The reason, Contra Costa officials tell me, was because only that company could meet the bid specifications for a universal system that would also be compatible with Alameda County's existing Motorola dispatch equipment.

Subsequently, Alameda County used that proposal to solicit participation from other East Bay jurisdictions.

Eventually, 29 cities, the two counties and four special districts joined a newly formed governmental consortium, the East Bay Regional Communications System Authority.

The authority has a 23-member board and an executive director, William McCammon, who used to be Alameda County fire chief. Working off the Motorola bids and plans, and purchasing Motorola equipment, the authority has started building communication cells in West Contra Costa, Livermore Valley and the Oakland-Berkeley area. Thus far, it has received $18.5 million in federal money.

If this all seems a bit backwards, that's because it is.

For starters, the system should have been planned from the onset to meet the needs of all the East Bay communities, not Alameda County's special requirement that the system be compatible with its own. That probably would have led to multiple bids and some pricing competition.

Second, the system should have been designed by an outside consultant, not the vendor who was the sole bidder to provide the equipment.

Third, the program should have a solid budget, something that doesn't exist to this day.

Credit Contra Costa with shining a light on the problems. The county hired an outside consultant, CTA Communications from Lynchburg, Va., which reviewed the Motorola bid and concluded that the price for equipment and services was about $11.5 million too high.

McCammon acknowledges the CTA study is correct. The authority has paid too much. "To CTA's comment, I agree with it," he told me. "I didn't have the experience or the background before to understand that."

Unfortunately, work has already started on 14 of the 34 transmitter sites needed for the system using Motorola equipment. McCammon says it was either spend the federal money or lose it.

Does that mean the authority is locked into using Motorola equipment for the rest of the project? McCammon isn't sure. That's why the authority has followed Contra Costa's lead and hired CTA to review the system. The consulting firm is to make recommendations on where the authority should go from here. It's report is expected in about two to three months.

Daniel Borenstein is a staff columnist and editorial writer. Reach him at (925) 943-8248 or dborenstein@bayareanewsgroup.com.