

Agencies join to form East Bay communications system

Network, with 30 participating cities signed on, expected to improve communications in emergencies

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Area officials have formed what they believe will be a better communication system in the event of an emergency or natural disaster such as the Loma Prieta earthquake and the Oakland fire.

Nearly 30 cities, including the city of Pleasanton, are partnering to form the East Bay Regional Communications Joint Powers Authority. Local mayors, elected officials and emergency service responders participated in a press conference last Friday at the Alameda County Emergency Operations Center in Dublin to announce the launch.

The partnership is historic because other cities and agencies across the state have just a pseudo plan in place, said San Ramon mayor H. Abram Wilson.

Alameda County Sheriff Greg Ahern added that better communication between agencies is something that has been lacking.

"This is not a great day--that will come later," said Contra Costa County Sheriff Warren E. Rupf. "But it is a day of remarkable progress."

The collaboration means there will be a uniform emergency communications system in place that will alleviate problems that arise when radio technologies are incompatible. The result currently is that first responders can't effectively communicate with one another because they currently operate across multiple frequencies such as 800mhz, 900mhz, low band, VHF and UHF.

According to a fact sheet, there are more than 15 different communications systems working in several radio frequency ranges, "making interoperability complicated at best." With technology rapidly changing, the current systems are becoming out of date and will need replacing in the next five years, the sheet also mentions.

The Friday press conference comes just three days after it was announced that the cities of San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose would be forming a similar network, the Bay Area Public Safety Interoperable Communications Initiative.

That partnership is expected to help link the entire region to a common communications network.

According to Alameda County project coordinator Bill McCammon, "The East Bay accord goes one step further by clearing a major obstacle to making such a network possible--successfully signing agreements with nearly three dozen local agencies with disparate needs and priorities toward a common goal."

Papers were filed Sept. 11 with the state of California that marks the official JPA formation.

McCammon, former Alameda County fire chief, said it's believed that the East Bay system will link up with neighboring communities sometime in the future.

The joint-powers authority will also "give public safety officials greater credibility as they seek to convince the local governments that investing in a regional system is a more sensible and cost-effective way to create a state-of-the-art communications backbone than the agency-by-agency approach that is the historic norm."

The East Bay network, which includes a new communications vehicle that will be the nerve center as well as other equipment, will cost more than \$60 million.

Officials are applying for federal grant funds to help pay for the associated costs. So far, about \$15 million has been raised. The JPA's first meeting will be Oct. 18 and the system is expected to be operational in two years.