

East Bay radio plan has leaders tuned in

● **Cities and counties hold first meeting to lay out \$68 million system for emergency communications**

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DUBLIN -- East Bay leaders took a monumental step toward public safety Wednesday when they started planning a \$68 million communications system that will allow firefighters and law enforcement officers to speak on the same radio channels during emergencies.

A joint powers authority representing Alameda and Contra Costa counties and virtually every East Bay city met for the first time Wednesday to discuss how to fix their aging and incompatible radio systems.

The 23-person authority board selected members to lead the effort and laid the groundwork to hire an engineering firm to design a communications system that would work with 32 transponder sites across the East Bay.

More than \$32 million in federal funding -- such as homeland security grants -- has been lined up for the communications system to be built by 2010.

Adding more grant funding will be easier because dozens of agencies now are working together on a regional system instead of working individually on smaller ones, said the authority's interim executive director, Bill McCammon, a retired Alameda County fire chief.

Communication gaps during the 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina underscored the federal government's attention on the need for regional radio systems.

"When they look at us now (for grants), that puts us at the top of the pile," McCammon said. Today, East Bay agencies have limited ability to speak with other departments. For example, police officers in Clayton, Concord, Martinez, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill and Walnut Creek use a frequency that cannot directly communicate with firefighters in their cities.

The California Highway Patrol and East Bay Regional Park District use a different system altogether. At times, these agencies must rely on their dispatchers to relay messages to personnel in the field. It's a Band-Aid approach that gets by for everyday calls, but it would not fare well in a major disaster, officials said.

Building a regional system to eliminate these communication gaps will cost \$68 million for transponders and other infrastructure costs and possibly as much as \$60 million for the individual radios, said Keith Richter, Contra Costa County fire chief.

"The challenge for us is finding the funding for that," he said.

Public safety agencies would pay for the radios, meaning larger departments would take on a greater share of the costs. Officials say they hope that additional federal grants will cover the remaining \$36 million in infrastructure costs, but options to fund the rest could include asking voters to approve a bond issue, McCammon said. With the new system, thousands of radios would not necessarily be on the same frequency.

A master controller at Alameda County's Emergency Operations Center in Dublin -- where Wednesday's meeting was held -- could set up dozens of "talk groups" allowing a cluster of similar agencies on their own channels. Also on Wednesday, the board named Concord Vice Mayor Bill Shinn, a retired Contra Costa sheriff's commander, as its chairman.

Alameda County Sheriff Greg Ahern will serve as the vice chairman of the board, which is made up of East Bay elected officials, city leaders, fire chiefs and law enforcement leaders. At the urging of Contra Costa County Supervisor Susan Bonilla, the board put off a plan to name an 11-member executive committee that would have broad decision making power, excluding financial decisions.

Dublin Mayor Janet Lockhart explained that a smaller committee could work faster.

"How often can a board of this size get together on a regular basis?" she said. "This would kind of keep things moving."

Bonilla responded that each of the 23 board members represents a specific interest and they should all have a say in major policy decisions.

"If anyone here thought it wasn't going to take a huge time commitment (to be on the board), they should have stepped down before," she said. "To actually turn over decision making power to 11 members -- I am not comfortable with that at all."

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