Indie Politics

Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA)
Phase 1 – Assessing MERA's Communications Structure & Effectiveness

To: MERA Outreach Subcommittee and Executive Officer Maureen Cassingham
From: Dan Mullen & Terry Price
Date: May 3, 2011
Re: Current MERA Communications

Overview:

Following our last meeting on April 5, 2011, we set about to review MERA's communications infrastructure and meet with a sampling of MERA's key actors, with the assistance of Executive Officer Maureen Cassingham.

Since then we've reviewed MERA's strategic plan, the member self-assessment survey, your website and key documents there, and we've held meetings and calls with the following leading stakeholders:

- Operations Officer Farhad Mansourian & Communications Engineer Richard Chuck
- Finance Committee Vice Chair and bond finance professional Tom Gaffney (Town of Ross)
- Executive Officer Maureen Cassingham

  We also contacted Supervisor Steve Kinsey's office, but we were unable to have a discussion with the Supervisor.

Our assessments of these communications pieces are detailed below, along with a quick glance at our next report for Phase 2.

The Strategic Plan as Adopted:

The Strategic Plan was prepared as an internal planning document. As such, it has little use in helping to educate people outside of those who are intricately involved with the inter-workings of MERA. For any "Plan" to be digested it needs to have clarity of its message, be brief, and presented in a matter that is inviting and easy to read. The challenge is to take the different sections of this document and reduce it to one page or less.

Strategic Plan relating to the development of a Communications strategy

The Plan calls for both an internal and external communications strategy. However, the bulk of the plan focuses on external communications and gives little attention to the need for improved internal communications.

A public outreach plan would be developed immediately to convey a positive image of MERA. In the Timeline for Actions section it calls for the development and implementation of generic value and image-based messages about MERA within six months (which will continue for 18 months). Once the near-term

and long-term funding plan is determined, it calls for the development of a message to garner support for a capital development campaign. We feel this timeline needs further review and possible revision.

While the external efforts are a critical element of the future success and funding of MERA, the gaps and challenges of effectively communicating within a very large and diverse organization must take first priority. Much of the communication disconnect was evident in the Self-Assessment Survey (presented below). All the members of MERA, including elected officials and city managers, need to be on the same page for an effective external outreach effort to be successful.

In future reports we will further identify the deficiencies in MERA's internal communications and make recommendations on solutions and action steps. They will include: identifying who needs to be included, the selection and training of communicators, determining the message and the methods to be used for distribution of information.

Self-Assessment Survey:

The results of this survey point to the need for improved internal communications. There is wide disagreement in some critical areas by the respondents, as indicated in the needs below. In addition, respondents indicate a need for more in-depth knowledge of MERA's operations, fiscal standing and future plans.

We strongly agree with the following survey conclusions;

- The need to develop a consensus vision that the Board will follow in the next three to five years
- The need for additional training and information on Board policies and procedures and member roles and responsibilities
- The need to develop governance model options that best fit the funding development, fiscal management and fiscal planning needed for MERA in the future
- The need to work to bridge the significantly divergent views of the large and small members on issues such as equitable representation
- The need to develop and implement effective outreach mechanisms and assess them on a regular basis
- To the extent that Board members have availability and expertise, the need to get them more involved in the various workings of MERA (serving on existing and new committees, providing expertise and support where needed, etc.)
- The need for the Board to make clear who is its official spokesperson for MERA

Discussions with Leading Stakeholders:

Technology

We met with Operations Officer Farhad Mansourian and Communications Engineer Richard Chuck to first understand the historical and future technical needs of MERA. The political buy-in for MERA's system hinges on the technical capabilities of the system to deliver services.

The technological limitations of such a regional communications structure may not be widely understood by members. For example, the FCC is constantly cutting bandwidth into smaller pieces, thus requiring local agencies to play catch up on the technological side to maintain their systems. This shortens the product life of local systems.

Likewise, there are only a few vendors in the world that supply such systems, and they only support their systems for a limited number of years, perhaps 10 years at a time. It should be noted that Mansourian has already solicited and received proposals from 2 vendors for the next generation system of communication technology. We could be quoting directly from these proposals when explaining MERA's needs, adding to our credibility.

The advantages of having an inter-agency system quickly become clear after hearing the horror stories of what different agencies endured prior to MERA. Those are stories that can be used to relay the effectiveness of MERA now – as Mansourian said, "We gauge success by not having complaints."

One big pitfall to avoid in our communications, however, is the natural assumption that our next funding mechanism will purchase a system that solves our problems for the entire life of the debt repayment. The next system purchase may last only 10-15 years, while the debt service may extend 20-30 years. In some of our discussions, with Mansourian and others, the proposed solution has been to align the years of product life with the years of debt service. That is, purchase a 20-year system and pay for it with a 20-year debt service.

Alternatively, we would suggest that MERA consider a communications strategy that supports "next generation communications" without specifically attaching it to only the proposals now in house. We should not be holding up a proposal and saying we need to pay for "this." No one honestly expects a school bond to pay for books that last the next 30 years, and we should be careful not to pitch this system as the silver bullet that will solve our emergency communications needs for the next 2 decades. Instead of pitching the system, we would want to focus on the ongoing needs to respond to disasters such as tsunami, earthquake and fires.

Finance

Tom Gaffney (Town of Ross) holds a unique vantage point within MERA in that he was involved in both the original financing of current debt in 1999 as a financial advisor to MERA, and that same debt's refinancing in 2010 as a MERA Board Member. Gaffney is also a citizen, not an elected official or public safety professional, giving us added insights into how other citizens might view the MERA system after they've been educated about it.

One item that emerged quickly was the different understanding of the lifespan of the current system. While Mansourian was saying the system might last another eight years (through 2019), Gaffney thought it would last through the end of current financing in 2021. Admittedly this is a small difference, but one that should be agreed upon before explaining this issue to the broader public.

Gaffney stressed that he thought MERA needed to have the major technological and financing questions answered internally before taking this plan to the broader public. Everyone at MERA needs to be reciting the same facts and figures.

He also pointed out that although the member agencies may concentrate on their own jurisdictions, citizens will see themselves as funders of multiple agencies. In other words, their tax dollars are going to the local fire, local police, county emergency services, etc. They may not care as much about who gets how much bandwidth at what times, or who is contributing how much money, but rather that the system works as a whole.

Along these lines, Gaffney focused on the 110,000 parcels within MERA's jurisdiction. As a member of the Finance Committee, they will be working through various options to pay for next generation communications.

Administration

In our call with Executive Officer Maureen Cassingham, she noted that MERA has several committees in varied stages of work, but all working towards the same goal of meeting MERA's next generation communications needs. The committees that we saw most affecting communications and outreach include this one, Outreach, plus Finance, Governance, Executive and General Board. As stated above, minutes from these committee meetings are available online.

With all the written information available online, we see Maureen as key to sifting through all this historical information and also setting up new lines of communication moving forward. She is central to our future needs to cut through and clarify what is most important to communicate to city managers, public safety leaders, councils, boards and citizens alike.

The current board is dominated by police and fire leaders, and lacks city managers & local elected officials. While this may address the long-term problems of turnover among elected officials, MERA now lacks key actors who speak to citizens more broadly on a regular basis. While the Governance Committee addresses long term membership questions, we will likely offer a communications strategy that focuses more on local city managers and elected officials. We've heard a request for this type of communications from all the stakeholders we interviewed.

MERA Website:

The website as currently constructed appears to an effective container for information that is needed by MERA members. However, it is insufficient as a means for public outreach. In the next report we will make recommendations for website revisions and propose how it would most effectively fit within an overall communications and outreach effort.

Phase 2:

In the next phase of our work, we'll be further exploring the Strategic Plan for opportunities to improve MERA's communications efforts. This new action plan will lead to Phase 3, the beginning stages of your outreach to members. Phases 2 and 3, however, may be adjusted to allow for the Outreach Committee's input and guidance on our communications goals.