

Indie Politics

Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) Phase 2 – Recommended Actions to Enhance MERA Strategic Plan

To: MERA Outreach Subcommittee and Executive Officer Maureen Cassingham
From: Dan Mullen & Terry Price
Date: July 14, 2011
Re: Action Plan Recommendations to Enhance MERA Strategic Plan

Overview:

Our original approach to this report was that it would be a tactical conversion of our initial findings into action steps to be implemented by the Outreach Subcommittee. After more consideration, and in light of discovered obstacles, we are instead providing more strategic set of recommendations and Strategic Plan revisions, along with a timeline to accomplish MERA's ultimate goal of financing a next generation technology system upgrade.

First, we've identified specific areas that require MERA's attention before we can proceed with a Public Outreach Campaign. We recognize that these areas generally fall outside the purview of the Outreach Subcommittee (and outside the scope of our contract). However, in order for us to move forward, we need to address these issues head on within all of MERA (beyond just the Outreach Subcommittee) so that our communications efforts have the best chance of success.

Second, we tackled the Internal Communications needs with several recommendations, a portion of which we can address in Outreach. However, other recommendations ultimately will need consideration and approval by other subcommittees and MERA as a whole.

Third, we've provided recommendations for Public Outreach for your consideration and adoption, including some adjustments to actions recommended in the Strategic Plan and a delay in hiring a Public Relations firm. These changes could net a total savings of \$40,000-\$90,000 over the next two to three years.

Finally, we summarize next steps and seek the Outreach Committee's feedback and approval to move forward.

Actions Needed Before a Public Education and Outreach Campaign Can Be Initiated:

As we stated in our [Phase 1](#) report, before an external education strategy can be implemented the members of MERA must all be on the same page. Based on our interviews and discussions with MERA staff and members it was immediately apparent there are numerous disconnects on various levels, including:

Resolution on Governance – There needs to be a resolution to the structure of the organization, including decision making and levels of fiscal commitment. The elephant in the room needs to be dealt with, even if it is a plan on how and when the issue will be addressed in the future.

Agreement on Needs, Costs and Timing – The extent of the upgrades and equipment replacement required, their related cost and when implementation must occur, differ substantially among those we interviewed. There seems to be a technology narrative and a different financial narrative – these two narratives need to come together into one story – what has happened, and what needs to happen.

Future Financing Options – There is a lack of agreement on how the upgrades and replacement equipment could be funded and financed. Even if it's not decided now or soon, we're looking for options that can be presented to the public for their review and consideration. This information impacts basic elements of any education effort.

Not only do we recommend holding off on a public outreach and communication effort until these major issues are resolved, it makes the development of a strategy and campaign plan difficult to prepare in their absence.

Internal Communications Planning:

We acknowledge that research, discussion and recommendations are pending various subcommittee actions for much of the above. The timing of their resolution will trigger the planning and implementation of the public education outreach strategy that we will discuss later in this report.

Although organizational issues are not within the purview of our consulting agreement, we feel compelled to recommend that MERA address internal communication problems. Implementing an effective public education campaign is problematic or impossible without effective organizational awareness.

Areas of internal communication that we recommend MERA address include:

Formalize a Sign-Off Process for Obtaining Agreement on Basic Issues and Facts – There needs to be a priority placed on developing a process to make decisions, or at least come to an agreement, on a multitude of topics faced by various subcommittees.

Fix Organizational Fragmentation – It appears that meetings of the whole of MERA are rarely held. Sub-committees working on related topics don't necessarily cross-fertilize, at least not historically, nor quickly. Information, while it may be shared via email and other ways, does not seem to be sinking in for some members. This is starting to be addressed with the intra-subcommittee meeting scheduled for September. We'd like to see more of these meetings held more frequently. As consensus is built among members of various subcommittees, those agreements on facts and options should begin to spread to other parts of MERA's membership.

More Appropriate and Consistent Representation – In some cases the member's representative may not be the most suitable (i.e. lack access to their governing body, lack of technical knowledge, etc.). Member representatives change frequently so they are constantly behind on the learning curve. There are new member trainings, but this may be the most difficult problem to solve due to the nature of MERA's long term planning needs.

Create Fact Sheet and FAQ – We recommend the creation of a 'Fact Sheet' and a list of 'FAQ's' (Frequently Asked Questions) that cover all of the important information involved in the proposed upgrading of MERA. The process of creating these documents should help force MERA members and stakeholders to agree on basic facts, and also serve as a run-through of the Sign-Off process mentioned above. Moreover, these documents should help educate newer members quickly to bring them up to date.

Council and Governing Board Presentations – Once we have a Sign-Off process and the Fact Sheet and FAQs in place, we can begin to roll out PowerPoint presentations to City and Town Councils and other Boards. The early vetting of the Fact Sheets and FAQ should enable the committee to test internally some of the messaging and facts, before taking the show on the road. Several MERA members have asked for a public presentation by the Outreach Committee to help them educate their home agency members and constituents. The above items need to be handled first, but this should be doable in the near future.

Public Outreach:

We strongly recommend that the funding campaign and the public communication strategy be combined into one cohesive effort. This is counter to the adopted Strategic Plan, but we believe this change will be less costly, easier to implement and, most importantly, be more effective.

Reasons to Delay Public Outreach Campaign

While it may appear that a public relations effort implemented immediately to tout the positive aspects of MERA could have little downside, here are pitfalls to consider:

A Disjointed and Duplicative Process: Doing one major public relations campaign is a monumental effort. Doing two campaigns over a one to three year period – first to raise awareness of MERA and second to help win financing for the upgrade – would be more difficult, costly and time-consuming for MERA members.

Lack of a Compelling Story: The obvious first step of public education campaign includes the dissemination of information and presentations to elected officials and the media. For this approach to have traction with governing bodies it must stress a need that compels their attention. In the case of the media, there must be something new and exciting or be of grave public concern. Without expressing the absolute necessity for the replacement of an obsolete communication system we fail to have a compelling story to tell.

Lack of Agreement on MERA Facts and Clear Funding Objectives: As stated previously, there are many areas of uncertainty in MERA, both organizationally and on the facts and objectives of the funding effort. When a MERA spokesperson is speaking to a governing body or media representative they must be able to respond to the most probing questions. For a funding campaign to succeed, the public has little tolerance for controversy or negative discourse. Our story must be clear, compelling, repeated and have a sense of urgency.

High Member Turnover: With MERA members turning over every couple years, any internal education that is done can easily be lost within two years time for a significant percentage of the members. Instead of striking while the iron is hot, when MERA members have been educated, we'd have to educate new members about any finance or public outreach campaign again in a couple years.

Revisions to Strategic Plan

The education and outreach section of the Strategic Plan mentions a variety of communication tools, some of which we're recommending changes to, including:

Delay Multi-Media Upgrade to MERA Website – Websites of governmental agency are rarely visited by the public. It is only when a person needs specific information or has a special need that they go to the extra effort of locating a website. To dramatically change the website, as the

Strategic Plan proposes, and make it a multi-media outlet for public consumption is not advisable at this time. The problem with the proposal, besides its \$30,000 price tag, is that the public would not visit the site unless there was an equally costly effort to ‘drive’ people to it. In the short-term, there are better ways to use these limited resources.

Instead Pursue Internal Communications Upgrade to MERA Website – Currently the MERA website is a container for information that is of interest to MERA members (Minutes, policies, planning documents, etc.). As such, it does an adequate job. We do support the recommendation in the Strategic Plan to expand the Website to include an internal communications system. It speaks to creating a section of the website that would be accessible only to members and could include a “blog or other interactive mechanism to enable members to float ideas, have dialogue...” While there will be costs related to a design upgrade, it will not approach the original estimates. This would also need to be approved by legal counsel on whether or not a public agency could have such a private internal communications system. This may be a moot consideration.

Develop Video for Use in Presentations, But Hold Off Buying Airtime – We agree a visual approach to telling the MERA story is desirable. Its potential placement would be on YouTube, commercial or public television. However, in the early stages of the education campaign it would be more useful to have a PowerPoint type presentation that would incorporate the video. This could be used for presentations to governing bodies as well as to small groups and community organizations. We feel the costs for video production and airtime (projected in the Strategic Plan at \$10,000 per year annually for years 2-7) are overstated and ought to be adjusted downward to reflect just the production costs.

Revisions to the Public Relations Campaign Rollout

In the adopted Strategic Plan it states that a Public Relations Firm would be retained in year 2 (‘Financial Considerations Related to the Strategic Directions and Initiatives’, #5 Public Education and Outreach Campaign (page 66) ‘Potential PR Firm assistance projected at \$50,000 in Year Two’).

For the reasons given in this report, we don’t think this is necessary. If the goal ultimately is to fund the technology upgrade, we recommend combining the efforts of public education about MERA with the public education about its technology needs. That doesn’t require communicating to the public as a whole about how great MERA is, but rather a focused effort over time to communicate MERA’s needs to the right people at the right time.

It is our hope that by first getting the subcommittees working together and moving in the same direction, we can expand that base of awareness out to other MERA members and stakeholders and, when the time is right, to citizens more broadly as part of a request to fund this much needed project.

Suggested New Timeline

In lieu of hiring a Public Relations firm to provide a timeline, we’ve briefly outlined what a timeline might look like for the type of project we’re recommending:

6-9 Months – ‘Set the stage’ for the launch of a long-term funding effort and public education campaign, specifically:

- Achieve ‘needed actions’ (as identified in this report) for agreement on governance, equipment needs, and financing
- Proceed with internal communications (i.e., facts, messaging, planning, etc.)

Develop workable long-term funding options and planning
Create materials and presentations for use with MERA members
Create detailed external education and outreach plan (for use in next phase)

Next 9-12 Months – Launch and run public education campaign, to include:

Development of messaging (story telling)
Development of presentations and presentation materials
Preparation of education materials and visual media
Media relations
Training and coaching of presenters
Community presentations
Direct mail, social media and other outreach methods
Polling of Community awareness of MERA and project (optional)
On-going consultation on elements of the funding plan

Next 6-12 Months – If appropriate, proceed to prepare for a ballot measure before the voters, possibly in June, which would include at a minimum:

Retaining financial/bond advisors and election attorneys
Lay the groundwork with MERA members, and eventually seek their approval for moving to an election
Prepare ballot measure language
MERA Board votes to place on the ballot, then private citizens would have to take over any campaign

Summary and Phase 3:

Based on the Outreach Subcommittee's feedback and approval, in the next and final phase of our work we would implement the beginnings of a Sign Off process and move forward with creating the Fact Sheet and FAQ sheet. We will need to establish who at MERA approves such documents in order to deliver finished products, but that is our goal.

We are also available to help the MERA move forward on any of the recommendations listed above, although we recognize this may require working with subcommittees besides the Outreach Subcommittee, to which we're contracted. We're prepared to do that if you wish.

Otherwise, much of this report has been to highlight what actions should *not* be taken at this time, and to recommend more affordable alternatives. We look forward to your feedback on these recommendations.