

Hearing Oct. 10 to get feedback on emergency radio system upgrade

Mount Tiburon site among those slated to get new equipment

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A public hearing is slated for Oct. 10 to gather feedback on a planned \$73-million overhaul of the Marin Emergency Radio Authority's public-safety radio system, including upgrades to its Mount Tiburon site.

The hearing is the next step in MERA's plans to implement a NextGen system, which officials say would improve radio communication coverage and reliability in the county by building eight new towers and upgrading most of the existing sites.

The two-hour public hearing starts at 6 p.m. Oct. 10 in the Marin County Board of Supervisors chambers, room 330 of the Marin Civic Center in San Rafael.

MERA is a 25-member joint powers authority created in 1998 to provide shared emergency radio services between fire, municipal, police, transit and water agencies around the county.

Last month, MERA released a subsequent environmental impact report, as required by the California Environmental Quality Act, for the new system. The report identifies the potential environmental effects of the project and recommends mitigation measures where needed.

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names and key dates. Send high-resolution photos to Executive Editor Kevin Hessel at editor@thearknews.com.

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The sole antenna at 99½ Mount Tiburon Road is named in the report as one of three existing sites where new equipment could result in radio-frequency exposure that would exceed what the Federal Communications Commission deems safe for humans; the other two sites are atop the Civic Center and at the Marin County Sheriff's dispatch center in San Rafael.

However, experts say emission levels would only exceed human-safe levels at the Tiburon site when all 16 channels that connect to the antenna are being used simultaneously, which would likely only occur during a natural disaster or other major emergency.

Even in an instance where emissions exceed human-safe levels, MERA officials say only workers standing on top of a water tank about 15 feet away from the antenna could be exposed to potentially unsafe radio-frequency levels.

MERA will be required to post warning signs near the access to a water tank at the site to caution workers.

At all other times, the emissions would be closer to zero and well beneath what the FCC deems safe. Radio-authority officials say the new system is designed so emissions will not under any circumstances reach nearby homes or affect people using the Tiburon Ridge Trail that skirts the site.

MERA spokesman Dave Jeffries said the NextGen upgrades are necessary to adhere to FCC rules changes and improve the coverage and reliability in chronically spotty areas such as Lyford Cove and Paradise Drive in Tiburon.

The update, which is already several years behind schedule, would transition the service to 700-megahertz frequen-

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The third alternative, submitted by the project's contractor Motorola Solutions, would utilize eight existing sites and add seven new ones, using the 700-megahertz frequencies.

The final alternative provides options to lessen the visual appearance of the proposed sites and also suggests three alternative locations.

In addition to attending this public hearing the week, community members can submit comments through Oct. 21 to MERA Operations Officer Ernest Klock at mera-eir@marin-county.org. Comments can also be mailed to Klock at 3501 Civic Center Drive, room 304, San Rafael, CA, 94903.

After the Oct. 21 deadline, MERA will finalize the system design and release a final report to the public.

From there, concerned parties have 30 days to bring a lawsuit under the California Environmental Quality Act, Jeffries said.

When MERA attempted to install its first radio tower in Tiburon in 2000, neighbors to the project sued for lack of transparency, tying up the system's implementation for several years.

This time around, MERA has aimed to be more transparent, Pearce said, asking for community support and funding for the project.

"We did a lot of outreach and due process on this," he said. "We just want to make sure we address any concerns if there are any concerns."

The draft environmental impact report can be viewed on the county website via arkn.ws/MERA-Upgrades.

cies and would raise its capacity to 5,000 users. MERA members, including the Tiburon and Belvedere police departments and the Tiburon and Southern Marin fire protection districts, are currently paying off the first iteration of the radio system. The remaining \$2 million will be paid and the project bond retired in August 2020.

In 2014, voters narrowly approved \$72 million for the NextGen upgrade through a \$29-per-year parcel tax.

As part of the NextGen upgrades, the antennas and other radio equipment atop Mount Tiburon will be taken down and replaced with new technology that can handle a higher frequency. The monopole housing the equipment will be raised to 60 feet above ground level, Jeffries said.

The orientation of the antennas will also be shifted slightly to communicate with a new site proposed on Wolfback Ridge near Sausalito, improving coverage on the peninsula, said Tiburon Fire Protection District Chief Rich Pearce, who also serves as MERA board president.

With the new system, eight new sites would be added at Muir Beach, Wolfback Ridge, Mount Burdell, Tomales, Coyote Peak, the Sheriff's dispatch center in San Rafael and on water tanks in Mill Valley and Las Gallinas. Five existing sites would be decommissioned, and the remaining 10, including the Mount Tiburon antenna, would be upgraded.

As required by the California Environmental Quality Act, MERA has laid out a number of alternatives for its NextGen upgrades that would keep the system on its current bandwidth and lessen the project's scope or stop the project altogether.

Under the first alternative, MERA would continue operations with existing equipment on 400-megahertz frequencies. The second alternative would keep all existing sites but upgrade the equipment at each location and switch to

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