

Marin emergency radio system update to undergo environmental review

Review planned for project to improve communication

By Adrian Rodriguez, Marin Independent Journal

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Leaders of Marin's emergency radio network are gearing up for the environmental analysis of a proposed "next generation" system that has been years in planning.

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority's public safety system calls for adding antenna or microwave equipment to eight new sites, retaining and upgrading 10 existing sites and decommissioning five others.

"This is critical infrastructure for all of our first-responders," said Richard Pearce, chief of the Tiburon Fire Protection District and governing board president of MERA. "Having the seamless communication effort is really important."

Pearce said county planners are busy collecting public comment on the proposed sites and design, including the impacts to biological, aesthetic and cultural resources, hazards and hazardous materials and consistency with land use requirements.

The next generation system is expected to have similar impacts to those evaluated in the environmental impact report certified in 2000. The comment period closes June 18. Any public comments collected will be folded into the drafting of a subsequent environmental impact report, which will evaluate the new sites and additional equipment.

The radio system is a vital countywide communications link for police officers, firefighters, public works crews and others who have to respond to emergencies and communicate en route and on scene. The new system will replace an old and outdated one. Federal changes in frequencies also required Marin to make the change by 2023.

"We're trying to get the word out of what's going on," said Ernest Klock, assistant director of MERA and operations officer of the county public works department.

Klock said MERA officials held a community meeting on the project May 31 that was publicized, but only one community member showed up.

Last week, Klock presented the project to the Mill Valley City Council to discuss key changes to the plan since the county and MERA in 2017 hired Motorola Solutions for \$34.3 million to create and install the radio system.

One of the new aspects is the jettisoning of the Mill Valley City Hall and Mill Valley Police Station antennas and the addition of an antenna at the Marin Municipal Water District tank on Edgewood Avenue in the city.

"When we looked at coverage and existing sites, we had to determine what is the best choice to get the best coverage," Klock said.

Mill Valley Mayor Stephanie Moulton-Peters said she is pleased with the project's progress.

"We have seen how critical these systems are in the event of a wildfire or other major disaster and our system is at the end of its life," she said. "The county public works department has done a very good job of evaluating the sites where the new equipment would be located."

Other sites that will be commissioned include Forbes Hill in San Rafael, a site at Mount Burdell near Novato that will be swapped for another nearby site, and the Bill Hill Road antenna in Sonoma.

New equipment will be added to the sheriff's dispatch center in San Rafael, at an existing cellphone site in Tomales, a water wellhead at Coyote Peak, the MMWD water tank at Skyview Terrace in San Rafael, a water tank at Muir Beach and a broadcasting tower site at Wolfback Ridge in Sausalito.

Coverage gaps — including a northern portion of the county along Highway 101 in the Tomales area, the Stinson Beach-Muir Beach area and parts of the Tiburon peninsula — have plagued the current system.

Dave Jeffries, deputy executive officer of MERA, said part of creating an efficient network is "making sure that as we build the system that we're not going to interfere with other systems in the area."

As an example, if MERA broadcast a signal from Mount Tamalpais, while it might be strong, "it would hit San Francisco, Alameda and even Contra Costa," he said.

"We have to make sure that we are putting out the best signal for our members, but without blasting that signal to our neighbors," he said.

The system will be paid for with money generated by a parcel tax that Marin voters approved in 2014. It is estimated that the 20-year tax — costing about \$29 per household annually — will help generate more than \$60 million in revenue.

The county expects to release a draft environmental report in the fall.

Public comments can be emailed to mera-eir@marincounty.org, or sent to Ernest Klock, MERA Operations Officer, 3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 304, San Rafael, CA 94903. More information on the project is available at bit.ly/2rCarvg.