

Editorial: Crucial time approaches for Marin emergency radio system

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Marin voters' approval of a \$29-per-year parcel tax in 2014 fueled the rebuilding of the county's emergency radio system, a countywide network tying police, fire and other emergency responders.

Nearly four years later, planning to replace the current, outdated system is reaching a critical stage. The Marin Emergency Radio Authority this fall will release for public review environmental planning documents, including plans to add new antenna sites for the \$34.3 million multi-agency project.

The goal has been to not only install a system with up-to-date equipment, but to close gaps in the current system, fixing radio "dead" spots around Tomales, Stinson Beach and Muir Beach and parts of the Tiburon Peninsula.

This is a critical public investment. Crystal-clear communication and coordination are vital to effective emergency response and getting the new system built and up and running as soon as possible should be a top priority.

Construction of the system that is being replaced was hampered by lengthy fights over the location of the antennas, most prominently a costly legal battle over the installation of an antenna next to a water tank near the top of Mount Tiburon.

Neighbors involved in the fight cited possible health risks and a reduction in property values, both of which were countered by local and county officials who eventually approved the site.

Some of the changes in the new system will be replacing the antennas on the Mill Valley City Hall and police station with an antenna at the water tank on Edgewood Avenue,

Others include one on Forbes Hill in San Rafael, moving the Mount Burdell site in Novato and on Bill Hill Road in Sonoma. New equipment also will be installed in Tomales, at the water tanks at Skyview Terrace in San Rafael and Muir Beach and on a broadcast tower on Sausalito's Wolfback Ridge.

It is important that MERA conduct a public process that reaches out to neighborhoods near these sites and get them involved at the front end of the process. MERA's leadership should emphasize the need to avoid battles that created costly delays for the current system.

MERA also needs to make sure that the equipment works with Marin's network of public alert systems. As we learned during last year's North Bay fires, too many Santa Rosa residents were left unaware of the threat of the wildland fire that eventually swept their homes and cost many lives.

The building of a new MERA system, replacing the current network's outdated equipment and improving its coverage, is an important weapon in protecting people and property in the case of an emergency.

MERA's public announcement of the planned rollout of its draft environmental report is an important first step. It needs to keep the public apprised as the process moves forward and address possible clashes now rather than getting stuck in them later.

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