

Radio millage to be boosted - Public appears unaware of May 2 vote on public-safety property tax

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Washtenaw County voters will soon decide whether to pay the \$32 million bill for an enhanced emergency radio system that some officials have dubbed the most pressing public-safety issue for the county now and in the near future.

Despite more than two years of political advocacy, spurred largely by modern-day threats of terrorism, natural disasters and epidemic diseases, few county residents have heard much about either the need or the proposed solution.

"It seems to be getting ignored by everyone," said Chuck Ream, a Scio Township trustee who has earned a reputation recently for fighting big-budget countywide proposals. "There are some serious questions about spending \$30 million on something we don't know much about."

The consortium of local police, fire and ambulance service officials that developed the proposal has set out to change that, beginning last week with an aggressive schedule of public presentations at local government and organization meetings. The presentations will continue at public gatherings throughout the month, and billboards urging residents to vote are planned to go up along area expressways this week.

The consortium is asking residents to approve on May 2 a 0.2-mill tax levy that will generate roughly \$32 million over 10 years to unify into one system the four existing communications systems used by the county's 30 emergency response agencies. The millage would translate roughly to a \$25 annual increase for the owner of a home with a market value of \$250,000.

Supporters say upgrading to digital-radio technology and constructing new towers will ensure all public-safety agencies can communicate directly with each other during normal and crisis situations. The current network has had more than a dozen failures since 2004, and it is increasingly difficult to find replacement parts for aging components.

The recommended 800 MHz system would also eliminate so-called "dead zones" in rural areas of the county where radio reception is so poor and unreliable that police officers and firefighters often use cell phones.

Although some of the immediate needs are obvious and the tax increase is relatively small compared to other recent public-safety related millages, the extent of voter support for it is not clear. No organization has filed to oppose the millage with the County Clerk's office, officials said. That doesn't mean everyone favors the proposal.

Scio Township resident Bob Binkowski, who recently retired, said the timing of the request is poor.

"With all these taxes, am I supposed to go back to work?" he said. "I know we need the equipment, but with the state of the economy as it is and more layoffs coming that we don't even know about, this is not a time to hit voters for more money."

Yet advocates feel strongly that the request will pass once the message is out.

"Our biggest hurdle is timeline; there just isn't much of it for voters to digest a lot of it," said Saline Police Chief Paul Bunten, chairman of the Washtenaw County 800 MHz Consortium. "I believe it is ours to lose."

Some residents who recently heard presentations didn't need much persuading.

"Look at (Sept. 11), first responders couldn't talk to each other and that was a major problem. This is a no-brainer," said Jean Nelson of Ypsilanti.

How we got here

Bunten was with the Ann Arbor Police Department in 1986, when it and three other local police agencies first organized support for a computer-controlled communications system. A tower was built with general-fund contributions from the participating agencies.

The plan was to add towers to achieve broader coverage, but the costs outweighed political will to complete the plan, he said.

By 1997, the system could not meet the county's growing population and development, and a new tower was built on Jackson Road west of Ann Arbor to cover rural areas to the west. System operators also rented space on the WEMU radio tower to cover the county's eastern municipalities. Phone-line surcharges helped pay for those upgrades, and other municipalities joined the system.

In 2003, public safety officials said the system was outdated, and poor coverage, particularly in the southeast, northwest and southwest corners of the county was jeopardizing the safety of first responders and the public. A new committee was formed to assess problems in the system and studied nine possible options. It concluded the best and "cheapest" solution was to join the Michigan Public Safety Communications System - a multi-site, dedicated public safety wireless communications network that enables all state, federal, and local agencies with radios on the system to communicate with each other in routine and disaster situations.

Still, the costs of infrastructure, hardware and software to operate the system and user fees charged by the state for inclusion are too much for any one government entity or even a pool of governments to bear, officials said, which is why they're turning to the public.

Officials first talked about putting the proposal on the November 2004 ballot, then proposed to put it on the ballot with a \$314 million countywide jail-expansion millage for a special election in February 2005. Advocates of the public safety millage and county officials feared two large millage requests packaged together would doom the projects. The proposal was then slated for last November's election but was again delayed, this time to May, after township clerks complained about the cost of running what, in some places, would have been a single-issue election.

Trying to avoid controversy

Voters soundly defeated the jail millage, which unintentionally had a lingering effect on the radio millage as the county tied funding for alternative jail plans to funds historically allotted to help communities that contract for sheriff's deputy patrols. The contentious matter is still pending in court and will not likely be resolved by the time of the May 2 election, as many 800 MHz plan proponents hoped.

County Commissioner Ronnie Peterson, D-Ypsilanti, said he thinks moving the vote to May was an attempt to distance the proposal from the road-patrol controversy and the August primary, when several contested races for municipal, county and state seats could boost turnout.

"We bowed to (the consortium's) wishes because they thought it would help politically," Peterson said. "But the voters here are sophisticated and are not going to be fooled. They're concerned about tax dollars here and will vote on their conscience."

Proponents of the radio millage worry that voters will confuse it with the road-patrol controversy even though the two issues are unrelated. Bunten said he mentions the possible confusion without prompting at public presentations because he figures it's on someone's mind. There's even a disclaimer contained in a bright yellow box on the campaign literature declaring the issues are separate.

Supporters are hammering the idea that in whatever form police patrols continue, the officers will need radios to communicate.

In the meantime, proponents have lost two of the proposal's strongest advocates. Ann Arbor Police Chief Dan Oates and Ypsilanti Police Chief George Basar each left their respective posts within the past six months.

Bunten acknowledged backers of the proposal miss Oates' leadership on the issue and the pair's strong advocacy, but said they're pressing on. Their challenge is to convince people in tight economic times to support public-safety improvements that they won't see in terms of additional officers.

"It improves everyone's safety, the first responders and the public, when we can communicate more effectively," Bunten said.

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