

Cities push for King County levy to replace emergency radio system

King County is considering asking voters for as much as \$250 million in property tax to pay for a new emergency radio network.

By [Daniel Beekman](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

Officials of King County cities and county officials want the Metropolitan King County Council to ask voters next year for a nine-year, \$200 million to \$250 million property-tax levy to pay for a new emergency radio-communication network.

The existing network — used by first responders throughout the county — is more than 20 years old and needs to be replaced, says Fred Jarrett, the county's deputy executive, comparing the handheld radios carried by police officers, firefighters and emergency health-care providers to cellular phones from the 1980s.

"In the past 25 years there have been something like five generations of commercial cellphone systems," Jarrett said. "Our system has been stuck in time."

The existing emergency radio-communication network was paid for with a three-year, \$57 million levy that voters approved in 1992. It consists of approximately 16,000 mobile radio units and 28 radio towers.

The network is owned by four entities, which together form the King County Regional Communications Board: the county, the city of Seattle, a consortium of Eastside cities and a consortium of South End cities.

The board was a leader in taking a multi-jurisdictional approach to emergency radio

communication, said Jarrett. In 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City, police and firefighters there were still using separate radio channels.

"We've been fortunate in King County to have this fully integrated system and we've done everything to maintain it," said Patti DeFazio, finance director for Seattle's Department of Information Technology. "But the technology is becoming obsolete."

The vendor for the existing network is Motorola, and the company has told the board that it will cease all support for the network's components in 2018, DeFazio said.

"The system is critical to the operations of our first responders," she said. "The police and fire departments are completely dependent on the system for dispatching emergency calls, and our public utilities also use the system."

The board's partners have been working on a replacement plan for several years, Jarrett said.

"We've gone out into the market and asked who would be willing to provide us with a new network. We've asked for new technology to be better in several ways," he said.

The board's partners have received two bids — from Motorola and Harris Corporation — and is "close to signing a contract with one of them," Jarrett said. "Now we're ready to engage in a discussion about financing."

The partners will likely request a 2015 ballot measure authorizing a levy lift of seven cents per \$1,000, Jarrett said. Voters may weigh in as early as April, he said.

The project will be expensive because the equipment will be highly sophisticated, said Mark Schmidt, an information-technology project manager with Seattle.

The partners have ruled out using the region's cellular-phone network because that network supports only one-to-one conversations and to ensure that emergency communications can continue when cell service breaks down, Jarrett said.

The county's existing emergency radio-communications network supports up to 27 simultaneous conversations, officials say.

The partners are seeking portable radios with 97 percent coverage of urban and suburban areas. The existing radios have 94 percent coverage, DeFazio said.

In order to implement a new network, the partners must sign a new interlocal agreement. The Seattle City Council's public-safety committee will likely vote on the agreement Jan. 7, and the council as a whole on Jan. 12, DeFazio said.

Daniel Beekman: 206-464-2164 or dbeekman@seattletimes.com