



**TOWN OF FAIRFAX  
STAFF REPORT  
October 2, 2013**

**TO:** Mayor and Town Council  
**FROM:** Roger Meagor, Fire Chief  
**SUBJECT:** MERA's Next Generation Project Presentation

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**RECOMMENDATION**

For information only: no decisions or actions are required at this time

**DISCUSSION**

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) is a Joint Powers Authority formed in 1998 to plan, implement, and manage a countywide public safety and emergency radio system for the use of all member agencies. Twenty-five member agencies use MERA routinely, encompassing every agency dealing with public safety in Marin County. Several other safety partners also have access to the MERA communication system, including California Highway Patrol, Golden Gate Bridge District, Marin Humane Society, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the Coast Guard.

The Fire Chief will be presenting an update on the current status and future plans of the Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA). MERA has started the planning process to replace the current Public Safety Communications System with a new system in 2018.

Dave Jeffries, MERA Special Project Manager, and Alex Anderson, MERA Special Administrative Assistant, will be in attendance at the meeting to answer questions and receive feedback from the public and the Town Council.

# MERA

Marin Emergency  
Radio Authority



## WE'RE CONNECTED FOR YOUR SAFETY:

All Marin County public safety agencies can communicate through MERA, including police departments, fire departments, public works departments, animal control, transportation agencies and parks departments!

### MERA MEMBERS:

- County of Marin
- City of Belvedere
- Town of Corte Madera
- Town of Fairfax
- City of Larkspur
- City of Mill Valley
- City of Novato
- Town of Ross
- Town of San Anselmo
- City of San Rafael
- City of Sausalito
- Town of Tiburon
- Bolinas Fire Protection District
- Central Marin Police Authority
- Inverness Public Utility Dist.
- Kentfield Fire Protection District
- Marin Community College Dist.
- Marin Municipal Water District
- Marin Transit
- Marinwood Community Services District
- Novato Fire Protection District
- Ross Valley Fire Department
- Southern Marin Fire Prot. Dist.
- Stinson Beach Fire Prot. Dist.
- Tiburon Fire Protection Dist.

### PARTNER AGENCIES:

- CHP Dispatch Channels
- Golden Gate National Recreation Area Dispatch
- Golden Gate Transit Dispatch
- National Mutual Aid
- Petaluma Police Dispatch
- Sonoma Sheriff Dispatch
- State Emergency Management
- State Mutual Aid
- US Coast Guard

## IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT MERA SERVICES

### MISSION:

MERA is a collection of public agencies formed in 1998 to plan, implement and manage a countywide public safety and emergency radio system for the use of all member agencies. MERA provides crucial communications to 25 member agencies, both day-to-day and after a major emergency or natural disaster.

### ABOUT:

MERA radio communications is the backbone of the 911 emergency response system. MERA provides the communication link between 911 public safety dispatch centers and public safety units in the field that respond to emergencies. The MERA radio system gives the dispatch centers the ability to assign single or multiple responders (depending on the emergency) within just seconds of receiving a 911 call.

### BUDGET:

Annual Operating Budget is \$1,651,432 in FY2013/14.

### CHALLENGE:

The system was designed to accommodate 1,580 mobile and portable radios with expansion capacity to 2,500 radios. Today it serves 2,897 radios, which is significantly above the projected total originally anticipated over the 20-year life of the system. The current system is not only more extensively used than expected, it is getting older and we must plan for a replacement system to ensure we can maintain our reliable emergency communications.

### SOLUTION:

MERA is planning for a Next Generation communications system that will:

- ✓ Sustain reliability during 911 emergencies and major disasters
- ✓ Enhance coverage due to more tower sites and other improvements
- ✓ Provide new radios with updated technology for first responders
- ✓ Improve response times due to hardware and software upgrades
- ✓ Comply with new regulations in force in the next few years
- ✓ Allow for expanded users and number of channels
- ✓ Offer regional interoperability in 10 Bay Area counties

### FUTURE COST:

Approximately \$40 million, which would be financed with grants and a parcel tax bond issuance, requiring a two-thirds vote for passage. Based on our current estimates, we anticipate the cost for a single-family residence to be approximately \$2.50 per month. We are also considering a low-income exemption for seniors.

# **MERA**

**Marin Emergency  
Radio Authority**



## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT MERA**

### **1. What is MERA?**

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) is a Joint Powers Authority in Marin County formed in 1998 to plan, implement and manage a countywide public safety and emergency radio system for the use of all member agencies. Twenty-five member agencies use MERA routinely, encompassing every agency dealing with public safety in Marin County. Several other public safety partners also have access to the MERA communication system, including California Highway Patrol, Golden Gate Bridge District, Marin Humane Society, Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the Coast Guard.

### **2. Can I use it in an emergency?**

Yes, you use it every time you call 911. MERA radio communications is the backbone of the 911 emergency response system. However, it is strictly for use by authorized public safety agencies and providers and cannot be used by private citizens. This is meant to ensure enough bandwidth is available during emergencies so lives can be saved in the most severe of disasters, including earthquake, flood or wildfire. MERA provides the communication link between 911 public safety dispatch centers and public safety units in the field that respond to emergencies. The MERA radio system gives the dispatch centers the ability to assign single or multiple responders (depending on the emergency) within just seconds of receiving a 911 call.

### **3. Do my tax dollars pay for this service?**

With the current system, MERA services are paid by member agencies, which are funded by tax dollars. The funding was designed so that each agency, and by extension each taxpayer, pays their fair share for the services they receive. For the Next Generation system, we are exploring a parcel tax paid directly by taxpayers to fund capital improvements. This would reduce the immediate impacts a capital plan would have on individual agencies, but member agencies would still have to pay for operating and replacement costs.

### **4. What challenges does MERA face?**

The system was designed in 1998 to accommodate 1,580 mobile and portable radios with expansion capacity to 2,500 radios. Today it serves 2,897 radios, which is significantly above the total that was originally anticipated over the 20-year life of the system. The current system is not only used more extensively than expected, it is getting older and we must plan for a replacement system to ensure reliable emergency communications, both day-to-day and after a major emergency or natural disaster.

### **5. What would we gain with a Next Generation System?**

- ✓ Sustained reliability during 911 emergencies and major disasters
- ✓ Better coverage due to more tower sites and other improvements
- ✓ New radios with updated technology for first responders
- ✓ Improved response times due to hardware and software upgrades
- ✓ Compliance with new regulations in force in the next few years
- ✓ Ability to expand users and number of channels
- ✓ Regional interoperability

### **6. Can we use parts of the current system with the Next Generation system?**

Yes. We intend to re-use as much as we can, but the primary re-use will be structures and tower sites – which is a large capital investment we retain from the last generation of MERA. Much of the technological equipment, however, will be at the end of its life cycle by the time the Next Gen system is up and running. In addition, we need to maintain the current MERA system during construction of the Next Gen system and until all MERA users have completed their transition to the new system.

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**For more information, please visit MERA's website at [meronline.org](http://meronline.org)**

## **7. Why can't we just use smart phones?**

This is extremely reliable, secure public safety equipment, designed to be used in the worst weather and hazardous environments. In addition, public safety officers need to talk in rapidly formed groups of users who cannot risk cell phone busy signals that might occur during and after significant incidents. We cannot risk your safety with damaged equipment, busy signals or the inability of the first responders to coordinate and manage emergency responses. Think of the number of times your mobile phone has dropped a call. We cannot afford to let that happen in a life or death emergency.

## **8. These systems seem expensive. What are the costs based on?**

The system is comprised of different parts that work together seamlessly to support our entire public safety communications network. This system supports not a single agency, but 25 member agencies providing cost efficiencies that none of the 25 individual agencies would see if they developed their own systems. The costs emerge from a variety of component pieces, each of which is complex in its own right. One early portion of the project is site development and upgrades, environmental compliance, licensing and leases. The next component is the backbone of the system that includes the radio communication system, site equipment and dispatch consoles. The microwave radio system that connects all of the sites is another portion of the system. Finally, we connect an estimated 3,000 mobile and portable radios that support the police officers, fire fighters and other employees that function on the system and provide the services we can all recognize.

## **9. Why was this particular system chosen as the replacement system?**

After years of study and input from every major public safety agency in the county, the consensus was an overwhelming "Yes" to the current proposal. We also had an outside firm review a variety of options (AECOM Report, April 2010) and they identified this Next Gen plan as the best option. Their recommendations were further reviewed by MERA members. Those efforts resulted in the current proposal.

## **10. How much will this cost?**

MERA has developed a replacement project estimated at \$40 million. Funding would come from a mix of grants and a countywide parcel tax that if passed by voters would secure the necessary bond funds.

## **11. Am I already paying a tax for MERA now, and will this be a new tax?**

Currently, there is no special "MERA tax." The present system is funded by payments from member agencies, with different members paying different amounts according to their population and usage. MERA plans to ask voters to pay a \$29 per year

parcel tax to fund the bond for the Next Gen system.

This will be a new tax, requiring a two-thirds vote for passage. In the current budget-tightening environment, it was not practical to ask MERA members (cities and towns) to somehow find more money they didn't have to pay for the replacement system. Members will continue to fund MERA system operations.

## **12. What if I'm a senior on a fixed income and I can't afford another expense?**

Based on our current estimates, we anticipate the cost for a single-family residence to be approximately \$2.50 per month. We are also discussing a low-income exemption for seniors.

## **13. Will the bond be used to pay for public pension costs?**

No. The funds generated by this measure can only be spent for capital purposes, such as construction, communication equipment and towers. By law, funds cannot be spent for operating purposes such as administration, salaries and pensions.

## **14. Who will place the tax initiative on the ballot? How and when?**

If MERA members vote to move forward with this parcel tax request to voters, we expect to ask the Marin County Board of Supervisors to place this measure on the ballot for the November 2014 election. That request to the Supervisors would likely occur in July or August 2014.

## **15. If this is a problem for 2018, why are we talking about this in 2013?**

The process to develop a replacement system is a lengthy one. The current effort to create a funding source will run through 2014. Funds from the parcel tax will begin providing revenues in 2015. Once the funding has been secured, a detailed RFP will be developed that specifies the system and capabilities we require within our available resources. After providing potential vendors time to prepare and deliver their proposals, it will take additional time to vet their proposals and select a final vendor(s) leading to contract negotiations. After that, it will take additional time to develop the new tower sites and infrastructure before the system can be used. The timeline is actually fairly quick for a project of this size and complexity.

## **16. How can I find out more about MERA?**

To find out more information about MERA, please visit MERA's website at [meraonline.org](http://meraonline.org)

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