



**MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

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## Report to the Commissioners, Sept. 20, 2012

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The County, in conjunction with local public safety providers, is committed to providing our residents, and the First Responders who protect them, with highly professional, well-coordinated public safety services. At the core of that mission is the ability to field calls from the public when they have an emergency, quickly and efficiently relay that critical information to police, fire, and EMS agencies, and provide them with the support they need to safely respond.

Some of our Emergency Dispatch Radio System infrastructure and equipment are approaching the end of their useful life of operability. This is an extremely complex and extensive system that First Responders throughout Montgomery County rely on to protect the health and safety of our residents.

On February 2 this year, the County Commissioners appointed an ad hoc committee and asked me to lead the 32-member Emergency Dispatch Radio Committee comprised of elected and appointed municipal officials, county officials, and representatives of the police, fire and EMS units that use the system. It was the Commissioners intent that all stakeholders in the system would participate and everyone have an opportunity to be heard. To the greatest extent possible, I strove for consensus, but made it clear that I would give any dissenting views full consideration. What finally is recommended to the Commissioners will be my interpretation of what I believe are the best elements to come out of the ad hoc committee's deliberations.

The Committee met for the first time February 29, 2012. I divided it into subcommittees: Vendor Selection, Technology (what the system should be), Operations and Policy (how the system will be used), and Municipal Liaison and Finance (communications with stakeholders and identifying means for paying for the system).

The Commissioners appointed L.R. Kimball of Ebensburg, PA on April 5, 2012 to provide an outline based on industry standards of the ideal radio dispatch system for Montgomery County as a guide to the Committee of what its strategic goals should be.

Kimball held a series of meetings with the subcommittees and five focus group sessions with law enforcement, EMS and firefighters as well as County dispatchers, probation, parole and corrections officers and municipal public works employees. Kimball also set up an Internet-based survey to solicit input from first responders who were unable to attend the various meetings and received 255 responses. In addition, the consultant met with County technical staff and reviewed the existing equipment.

Kimball submitted its report and made a presentation to the Committee August 1 over which I presided. The subcommittees met subsequent to that and, based on their discussions, provided input to an executive committee I appointed to collate the ideas from the various subcommittees. The executive committee was comprised of Public Safety Director Tom Sullivan, Chief Operating Officer Lauren Lambrugo, the chairs of the three subcommittees and me. In addition, I consulted with the District Attorney and Sheriff when the need arose. Of special note, Sheriff Behr is a former Chief of Police who could provide a unique perspective. As an aside, I have relied heavily on her, not just in my role as chair of this committee, but further on other safety and security projects my fellow commissioners have seen fit to assign to me.

The County also engaged another consultant, Mission Critical, to conduct a peer review of Kimball's report to make absolutely certain that the advice we received from Kimball was generally accepted as accurate within the community of companies that do this kind of work. The Committee realizes that the decision on the radio project will certainly result in the expenditure of tens of millions of taxpayer dollars and therefore exercised the utmost care in every decision it reached. Along with the other Commissioners, I am acutely aware of efforts previously to politicize this issue, and the Committee operated under a strict mandate from all the commissioners not to allow any political considerations to enter into the recommendation process.

As a result of its extensive efforts, the Emergency Radio Dispatch Committee is recommending that the County obtain an additional 12 channels on the 700 MHz bandwidth to increase the capacity of the system to handle increasing amounts of radio traffic.

The Committee further recommends that the County consider a radio system that will provide the infrastructure to accommodate the new 700 MHz channels and the County's existing 800 MHz channels, increase the system's geographic coverage, replace the police and EMS radios and provide a software upgrade so that radios used by the fire service can operate on the new equipment.

As indicated by first responders during the focus groups and through the web survey, all radios on the system must have scanning and an emergency alert "panic button" as features. The more expensive medium and upper-tier models should also have encryption and be intrinsically safe, which means spark-proof for operating with hazardous materials.

The Committee further recommends that the County consider a countywide microwave network for communications to and from the towers. This would replace the leased T1 lines currently in use that have proven unreliable. The Committee believes that microwave technology represents the currently available best option for maximum coverage and is a critical component for the new system.

The majority of the Committee recommends that the County pay the costs of the infrastructure equipment and that the user agencies pay for the new radios. A minority of the Committee raised the possibility of the County covering the entire cost. This is an issue I want to consider further before making a recommendation to my fellow commissioners. We are very much aware of budget issues affecting our municipalities and that of our municipalities some are more affected than others. At the same time the County faces significant budget issues and capital challenges. The decision on the most appropriate funding mechanism for both the infrastructure and the needed radio equipment is an open question requiring further study which we will attend to shortly.

I want to commend the Radio Committee for its extensive and time consuming effort. The Commissioners recognize that this is a major decision and were thus anxious to use all of the talent and experience available to us as we prepare to decide the issue. I also appreciate the confidence my fellow commissioners have placed in me to oversee this undertaking. The next

step is for me to confer with CFO Monson on pricing options, and with COO Lambrugo on timing for further consideration by the Board of Commissioners.

Respectfully Submitted,

Bruce L. Castor, Jr., Commissioner