

Union asked to assist with emergency radios

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By Denise Larive
News Writer

New emergency radios will be a reality in all Berks County police forces, fire departments, and ambulance services beginning in January 2013. The purchase cost of that Federal Communications Commission mandate trickles down to the local municipalities that are served by the emergency services.

Bradley Silcox, assistant chief of Southern Berks Regional EMS, told the Union Township Board of Supervisors on July 18 that the township's annual portion to fund the ambulance's \$136,000 radio cost will be \$658.

"We're going around and asking the municipalities that we serve to help finance the system," said Silcox.

Southern Berks Regional EMS has stations in the Borough of Birdsboro, and Amity and Cumru townships, but also serves the municipalities of Brecknock, Kenhorst, Mohnton, Robeson, Shillington, and Union with additional stations in the county.

Silcox said the total cost for the radios in their nine ambulances is \$136,000, minus a \$23,000 county contribution and a \$6,400 cash discount by Motorola. The final cost to Southern Berks Regional EMS is \$106,000.

He said the county is purchasing the radios through a seven-year, zero-percent interest rate loan.

The board didn't take any action on Silcox's request.

"I'm tired of people coming in here and telling us we need to spend money we don't have," said Board Chairman Donald E. Basile. "For the money we're spending, what are we getting? Is the response time going to change? Are we safer for it?"

According to Berks County Emergency Management Director Brian Gottschall, the new \$40 million radio system is a P25 compliant 700 Mhz Phase II trunked system that is "state-of-the art and provides features that can enhance communications in myriad ways."

Silcox said the radios will provide emergency services units with "more secure air traffic and more frequencies available per channel."

He said the radios will replace the two radio systems currently used throughout Berks County, which he said, although they do work, there are some limitations such as occasional limited communications between police departments, fire departments, and ambulances.

“Right now you have to pick up the mobile unit so the dispatch can hear you, and you have to go to the truck because the portables don’t work,” said Silcox.

Supervisor Nelson L. Ott, Jr., said the Birdsboro-Union Fire Department is already budgeting the \$240,000 cost to purchase 50 to 60 radios.

Paul Shirey, chief of Friendship Fire Company #1 of Geigertown said emergency situations will be “safer for the guys inside the burning buildings” with the new radios.

“Pottstown Borough decided not to fund the half million [dollars] for new radios (in Montgomery County) because they don’t have the money,” said Basile. “We can certainly fund the \$650 per year but what are we getting? We’re replacing [street] signs, and at some point we have to say we have to see the cost benefit relationship because we don’t have the money. I’m very ticked off that we need to do this.”

Amity Township Manager Charles E. Lyon reported on July 6 that Amity Township will need to budget \$51,900 annually, for seven years, to fund the new radios for the Amity Township Police Department.

He said July 20 that neither Amity or Robeson townships have been contacted yet by Southern Berks Regional EMS to provide annual contributions.