

WE CAN NO LONGER AFFORD TO ROLL THE DICE

The recent spate of storms is over, and most Marin County residents have now had their power restored and are breathing a little easier. That, however, does not diminish the horror the storm left in its wake -- two lives were lost, a home was destroyed by a fire, tons of food was thrown out due to spoilage and thousands of dollars worth of property damage suffered. The storm also exposed the inherent weaknesses in our existing communications system and why MERA (Marin Emergency Radio Authority) must be completed as quickly as possible.

According to Marin County fire and police personnel, there were countless problems with the communications, including generator and microwave problems at Channing Way in San Rafael, an old generator on Mt. Tamalpais that would not start up, microwave problems on Mt. Sonoma that could have been avoided had MERA been in place, and the list goes on. As quoted in the Marin Independent Journal's storm coverage story of November 8th, Sheriff's Sergeant Doug Pittman said that transmission towers on Mt. Tamalpais and Big Rock Ridge lost power forcing officials to switch to secondary frequencies -- an issue that could have been avoided if the Marin Emergency Radio Authority system were in place since the system could operate on battery power.

In less than one hour on Thursday evening more than one thousand calls for service were received by the public safety dispatch centers in the County. This included several hundred 9-1-1 calls and many times more calls to the 7-digit emergency numbers answered by the local dispatchers. Over the course of the evening at least another thousand calls for help were answered. It was a very busy night.

While the fire, police and public works departments, as well as the sheriff's office, increased staffing to respond to the calls, there were not enough working tactical radio channels to operate efficiently. The MERA design includes over 25 tactical

channels for the fire service, 20 channels for law enforcement agencies, 15 channels for public works agencies and 13 tactical channels for interoperability between all MERA users. This extra ability is designed to allow each significant emergency situation to be managed separately without interfering with routine public safety radio communications on their primary dispatch channels.

MERA is designed to handle major storms, major fires, and major law enforcement emergencies without having to share channels, and it allows agencies to assist each other through mutual aid very easily.

The current radio “system” has one countywide common tactical channel for law enforcement, only three countywide common tactical channels for the fire service, and no countywide channels for public works agencies. This is not only inadequate – it is dangerous. Currently agencies must share tactical channels for different events, often unintentionally blocking important radio traffic because they cannot hear the other agencies on the air.

We live in an area where storms, fire and earthquakes are just some of the catastrophic possibilities we face as a community. But what about our day to day lives? Over the last several months, County fire personnel have been beset with serious obstacles while performing their jobs, including a wildland fire that burned three homes in August, the Olompoli State Park fire in September, the Big Rock Fire on Lucas Valley Road and an apartment complex fire on Green Oak Drive, also in September. In these situations, key information had to be routed over many different radio frequencies, wasting precious time, with no ability for police, fire or public works personnel to talk directly with each other. The high volume of radio traffic overwhelmed the primary command frequency, and the primary dispatch channel was overloaded. All this, in addition to the breakdowns in the equipment due to the fact that most of it is obsolete.

The fact that more lives have not been jeopardized, due to the antiquated system we are forced to continue to use, is almost miraculous. The time has come to stop rolling the dice and hoping that our professionals can continue to operate with less than adequate communication equipment. On behalf of the firefighters in this County, we implore the town of Tiburon to think in terms of the safety issues of the entire community and allow

MERA to complete its task of constructing the last component of the system – an antenna in Southern Marin.

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