

KNOX COUNTY COMMISSION

Special Meeting

Thursday – October 1, 2009 - 1:00 p.m.

A special meeting of the Knox County Commission was held on Thursday, October 1, 2009, at 1:00 p.m., at the county courthouse, 62 Union Street, Rockland, Maine.

Commission members present were: Anne Beebe-Center, Commissioner District #1, Richard L. Parent, Jr., Commissioner District #2, and Roger A. Moody, Commissioner District #3. County staff present included: County Administrator Andrew Hart, Administrative Assistant Candice Richards, Communications Director Linwood Lothrop and Finance Director Kathy Robinson.

Special Meeting – Agenda **Thursday – October 1, 2009 – 1:00 p.m.**

- I. 1:00 Meeting Called To Order**
- II. 1:01 Action Items**
 - 1. Act on Funding Options for Simulcast Radio System Upgrades (L. Lothrop.)
- III. Adjourn**

I. Meeting Called to Order

Commission Chair Anne Beebe-Center called the October 1, 2009 special meeting of the Knox County Commission to order at 1:00 p.m.

II. Action Items

1. Act on Funding Options for Simulcast Radio System Upgrades (L. Lothrop).

Communications Director Linwood Lothrop explained that he wanted to start by explaining what the footprint of the existing system looks like.

Commissioner Anne Beebe-Center commented that she wanted to know enough about the subject to be able to converse with people about it when she is asked questions.

Communications Director Linwood Lothrop stated that communication starts at the Knox Regional Communications Center (KRCC). From there it goes out to four repeater sites: Vinalhaven, Ragged Mountain, St. George Fire, and the KRCC is proposing to have another tower on Lenfest Hill in the Town of Washington. The control point is on Benner Hill in Rockland. When the KRCC needs to send a code, it is sent to Benner Hill, where it is then time stamped and sent along with the transmission to the four repeater locations at exactly the same time on a UHF link, at a 950 MHz frequency. The problem with the current system, as it is designed, is that the UHF signal is subject to extreme interference from a host of radio operations, some of which are within Knox County, but a lot of them are distant signals. One signal in particular is from Washington County, which meets up with the Vinalhaven tower because it is straight across the water and is causing a lot of interference. The Ragged Mountain site is getting interference from York County and Lewiston/Auburn 911, which use frequencies very similar to what the KRCC uses. The interference distorts the information and prevents the repeater sites from being in sync with each other, which causes them to compete with each other. He did not believe that the KRCC system interfered with the systems of other counties. It does not take much for other sites to out-power the KRCC system, especially if the other system is using frequencies that are close to the KRCC frequencies. This is regulated by the State; however, as long as a system's power output is within their licensed parameters, there is nothing the County can do about the interference. The County has been dealing with this problem ever since setting up the KRCC.

There are two issues:

1. Issue one: UHF link is outdated and does not meet the needs.
2. Issue two: Each site has one antenna (multi-directional antenna 360 degrees). The County needs to go to a two antenna system (one to transmit, one to receive). To fine-tune the current system so that it works better, you'd have to have people at each location to try to get it in sync better. Need to limit output from those sites. Ragged mountain covers about 70 percent of the county. Have to replace 4 antennas.

Cumberland County has a very similar system. Changing the KRCC's frequency until the new system is up and running could either cure the problem or make the problem worse. It is better to eliminate the UHF technology to current technology, which is a sure problem solution.

Lincolntonville is reachable by this system. It was tested and it works loud and clear there. They are eager for the County to make the upgrade. Waldo County is currently the backup for the KRCC.

The new system will be compatible with both Waldo and Lincoln County's communication centers. In November, when the new consoles come in, the KRCC will transfer to Waldo County for about four days. Lincoln County is considering upgrading as well.

You need to be able to use a portable radio and be able to talk back into the system. Out of all recently tested sites, Lenfest is the only site that covered all the issues 100%. Federal Homeland Security grant money paid for the upgrades to the system in use today; about \$600,000. Taxpayer portion was less than \$100,000. There is no way to know if the County will get any more Homeland Security Grants since the Federal government had helped pay for the last upgrades, and they may be unwilling to offer any further funding.

Homeland Security grants have been sought to pay for Reverse 911 capability. Four different vendors were reviewed. The capability works with the Emergency Management Agency, and would be useful for schools in an emergency situation. The Reverse 911 System is a \$35,000 project. Once the project for the Simulcast System is complete, it allows for expansion in the future.

The "Kimball Report" is a report issued by Robert Kimball, a company hired by Maine to assess current abilities, budgeting, employee costs, equipment, the 911 structure within the state and reducing the number of PSAP's.

Another study that has been done is the MS Comment, which has to do with the State Police billing out a huge radio network. There would be 40 towers throughout the state. The State's plan was to put all other communications centers out of business. They spent a million dollars to build a new, state of the art facility. At first, some towns and counties switched to having the State handle their dispatching, but now some of them are going back to other communication centers because of the terrible service they were receiving from the State's center. Some of the issues were incorrectly dispatched calls and misinformation. There will be more information on the State's plan after a State Communications meeting on October 13th. The State's communications system does not work well with systems in use by counties. It is possible that this was done on purpose because the State wants counties to switch to using the State Communications Center instead of having their own. There are ways that the systems used by the State and the counties could be compatible, but it would require the State being willing to cooperate and work to be compatible.

Currently, the KRCC can only get cell phone calls from US Cellular. All other cell phone providers (Verizon wireless, Sprint, Unicell, etc.) calls go to the State Police. It is like that for every county except Lincoln County, because Lincoln was the test site. They were chosen as such because of being small with a small call volume, and were given the State's new equipment. Other counties have petitioned the State to change this so that the KRCC can directly receive all cell phone calls, regardless of carrier, within the county. Verizon wireless was promised to be the next carrier that could work with all counties; however, the State will not allow any more changes until the footprint of the 911 system is stable since counties and towns keep changing which communications center they are using. If the calls go to the State's communications center first, the person calling for help has to say what the problem is, be put on hold by the State, is transferred to the KRCC, and then the person has to re-explain all over again to the County dispatcher. If the person hangs up before the call makes it to the KRCC, the dispatcher at the KRCC does not have any identifying information about the caller to be able to send help.

County Administrator Andrew Hart explained to the Commission that the Dispatch Advisory Committee opted for option 1, which entails doing the upgrade to the Simulcast System all in one go, rather than in stages. He stated that this was also his own opinion of what he thought the County should do and that he did not believe that the "band-aid" approach works. This is what the County has been doing, and it is just not working. He added that he felt that the County should put \$100,000 in the 2010 Budget and do a lease/purchase for the rest of the expense. There is no communications reserve money left because that was used to purchase the new consoles for the KRCC. As for County surplus, \$500,000 of that was used to fund the new terminal at the airport. The County no longer has any access to the Jail surplus now that the State owns it. The County really has to be careful about how surplus is used in the future because a large portion of the surplus (the jail's) is no longer available for County use. The Commission needs to decide between options 1 and 2. If the Commission and the Budget Committee decide on option 2, then that will just be what the County will have to do.

- A motion was made by Commissioner Roger Moody to include in the draft of the 2010 Budget, a sum of \$263,000, to support a simulcast radio system upgrade, being called option 1, as prepared by the county administrator and the communications director. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Richard Parent.

There was a short discussion about where this would be placed in the 2010 Budget, either in the Communications budget, or if it would go under a miscellaneous line, which would need to be created. It was decided to put \$16,800 in the Communications Capital line. The rest of it, \$246,200, would be kept out of the Communications budget.

Emergency Management Agency Director Ray Sisk explained that the sticker shock for the entire project will reduce the likelihood that the County will receive the Homeland Security grants that have been requested. If the County is able to come up with a match up front, such as \$100,000, the probability of getting a grant for the remaining \$163,000 increases, which would take away the need for any further funding down the road. The timeline for that process is fairly short. Some grants are in the final review process right now and have to be turned into Augusta by end of business day on October 8th. If the County was going to commit to a match, it would have to be done prior to that date so that the information on that could be included in the grant paperwork being submitted.

Commissioner Anne Beebe-Center suggested withdrawing the motion and rephrasing it to include more language about the funding.

- Commissioner Roger Moody withdrew his motion. Commissioner Richard Parent withdrew his second of the motion.
- A motion was made by Commissioner Richard Parent to include in the draft of the 2010 Budget figure of \$100,000 for a simulcast radio system upgrade, as proposed by the county administrator and the communications director. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Roger Moody. A vote was taken with all in favor.

Finance Director Kathy Robinson commented that if the County said that we were going to come up with \$100,000 out of the \$165,000 needed for the upgrade but are unable to come up with another funding source, the County would have to do a lease/purchase to cover the entire expense, not just the \$100,000. This still falls under the amount budgeted by the Advisory Committee but means that the County would need a longer lease/purchase than originally planned. It would still allow the County to move forward and to seek a match from Homeland Security grants. By committing the funds for the project, the match request will have a higher priority without having to go to the Budget Committee, and preserve the option of getting a lease/purchase if the County decides to do so.

County Administrator Andrew Hart explained that the final vote on the 2010 budget could be delayed if EMA Director Ray Sisk thought there was a chance that the County could get a matching grant now. The County has until the first of the new year to finalize the budget, so there is still plenty of time. It would be worth the delay if it saved the County thousands of dollars by getting a grant.

III. Adjourn

- A motion was made by Commissioner Roger Moody to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Richard Parent. A vote was taken with all in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 2:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Candice Richards
Administrative Assistant

The Knox County Commission approved these minutes at their regular meeting held on April 13, 2010.

Anne H. Beebe-Center, Chair – Commissioner District #1

Richard L. Parent, Jr. – Commissioner District #2

Roger A. Moody – Commissioner District #3