

The Facts: Bonds fund new countywide communications system

- Wireless radio system to link 30 police and fire agencies
- Two facilities will be renovated to provide 9-1-1 dispatch service for the City of Tucson and unincorporated Pima County
- More than 7,000 new mobile radios provided to first responders
- New radio communications system to begin operating in late 2013

Wireless radio project will improve public safety countywide

Pima County, Ariz. – In 2008, a 25-year-old man led police and sheriff’s deputies on a zig-zag car chase that began on the northwest side of Tucson and ended on Mount Lemmon, with one Tucson Police officer fatally wounded and two Pima County Sheriff’s deputies injured.

The two deputies survived. Throughout that deadly chase, police and deputies weren’t able to talk to each other on the same radio frequency.

The incident highlighted a serious flaw in emergency communications that is now being corrected.

The radio communications systems throughout much of Pima County are on different radio frequency bands and use different proprietary technologies.

They don’t provide for live, simultaneous communication among law enforcement, fire agencies and medical first responders.

The good news for county residents is that these outdated systems will be old news by late 2013, when the county’s new public safety Wireless Integrated Network, funded by bonds approved by voters in 2004, is expected to begin operation.

The new Pima County Wireless Integrated Network (PCWIN) system will enable 30 fire and law enforcement agencies from Tucson to Ajo, from Sahuarita to Mount Lemmon, and from the Rincon Valley to Avra Valley, to talk to each other by radio in real time on a single system, regardless of their jurisdiction boundaries.

Capt. Paul Wilson of the Pima County Sheriff’s Department is the wireless radio project’s administrator for Pima County. The Sheriff’s Department is a key partner in the project.

“It is imperative that first responders be able to communicate directly with one another to coordinate public safety services to minimize risk from events like the 2008 chase," Capt. Wilson has said.

Today, most local fire and police agencies must communicate with each other during an incident by radioing their own dispatchers, who then relay the information to the other agency's dispatchers. Those dispatchers radio their first responders. And then the first responders relay their message back the same way. It's a cumbersome process.

Pima County's new, shared wireless communications system will put more than 7,000 new radios into service.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon in September 2001, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security recommended the use of these “shared systems” to provide what it calls an “interoperability continuum” and to prevent “single points of failure.”

The complex project under way now in Pima County requires cooperation from diverse entities, including the Tohono O'odham Nation, Arizona State Land Department, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Department of Public Safety, as well as local police and fire agencies throughout Pima County.

The new wireless radio system will incorporate a number of new communications sites now being placed throughout the county.

Several of the new radio towers are already up. The county hired contractors who specialize in communications site work so that some of the towers could go up at the same time and the county could keep to its construction schedule.

Towers are up at the Golder Ranch Fire Station #370, Rincon Valley Fire District Station #1 and at the Oro Valley Town government complex.

Also, a new tower has gone up at Child's Mountain in Ajo and contracts for improvements at five sites owned by the city of Tucson have been awarded.

Although most of the project is funded by county bonds, \$10.5 million in federal monies have been provided to pay for some of the equipment for the project.

When Pima County voters approved the Public Safety bond issue in 2004, they also approved funding for new public safety 9-1-1 dispatch facilities.

Two sites will be renovated to provide enhanced dispatch services for the City of Tucson and unincorporated Pima County.

A new county facility, the Pima Emergency Communications and Operations Center, will be built at 3434 E. 22nd St, near Alvernon Way. A 125-foot radio tower with antennas and microwave dishes are part of this project.

The City of Tucson's existing emergency dispatch center at the Thomas O. Price Service Center at Park Avenue and Ajo Way will be renovated and upgraded as part of the project.

Each site will act as a 9-1-1 dispatch backup facility for the other.

The communications tower to be erected at the Pima County facility in Tucson will be fitted with multiple antennas to support the emergency services communications provided by the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service, in support of the Pima County Emergency Operations Center.

These volunteer radio operators provide their skills within a protocol created by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Federal Communications Commission.

They're trained to work within the guidelines of the National Incident Management System. And their skills enable local, state and federal government agencies to work together with the private sector during major incidents, such as floods. They're also the only amateur radio operators authorized to transmit, should the President of the United States declare an emergency and invoke the War Powers Act.

The new countywide radio communications system is also requiring some construction on University of Arizona-owned land on Tumamoc Hill on the city's west side, near St. Mary's Road. It's a popular hiking spot.

And although hiking access to the hill is already restricted during the hours of 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., some people still walk the hill during those times. Now, with the added presence of construction vehicles, access to the hill will be restricted at all times to hikers on specific weekdays while a new radio tower is erected. A sign at the base of the hill and a calendar on the PCWIN website will warn hikers when the hill will be closed to them.

Check the PCWIN web site for updates on access at www.bonds.pima.gov/wireless/. Then, click on the "Project Updates" link.