July 22, 2014

Board of Supervisors  
3501 Civic Center Drive  
San Rafael, CA 94903

SUBJECT: Marin County Emergency Communications and 911 Response Measure, Request from the Marin Emergency Radio Authority for Special Election

Dear Board Members:

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Conduct a Public Hearing;
2. Approve Resolution Calling a Special Election to be Consolidated with the November 4, 2014 General Election to Submit to the County’s Voters a Measure Authorizing the County to Levy a Special Parcel Tax for furnishing, operating, and maintaining a public safety and emergency radio communication system in cooperation with the Marin Emergency Radio Authority.

SUMMARY

Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) is a collection of 25 public agencies formed in 1998 to plan, implement and manage a countywide public safety and emergency radio system for the use of all member agencies. MERA provides crucial communications for all the residents of Marin, both day-to-day and after a major emergency or natural disaster. MERA radio communications is the backbone of the 911 emergency response system. MERA provides the communication link between 911 public safety dispatch centers and public safety units in the field that respond to emergencies. The MERA radio system gives the dispatch centers the ability to assign single or multiple responders (depending on the emergency) within just seconds of receiving a 911 call.

This shared services model provides a unified and coordinated emergency radio system that every Marin County first responder uses. It is by far the most cost effective means to providing critical life-saving 911 communications between emergency responders countywide. Before MERA, police, fire fighters and paramedics of different cities each purchased and maintained different radio systems. The bringing together of 25 agencies into one organization not only allowed all responders to communicate with each other and other counties, it has
lowered costs, eliminated duplication, reduced staff costs, improved technology and reduced response times. The result of this unique joint powers agency is a 911 communication system that saves money and saves lives.

The system was designed to accommodate 1,580 mobile and portable radios with expansion capacity to 2,500 radios. Today it serves 2,897 radios, which is significantly above the projected total originally anticipated over the 20-year life of the system. The current system is not only more extensively used than expected, it is aging and approaching obsolescence. The system is experiencing component malfunctions causing system reliability to decrease. In addition, replacement equipment is being phased out by the manufacturer, with certain elements already no longer manufactured and increasingly difficult to maintain. MERA is planning for a replacement system to ensure they can maintain reliable emergency communications.

MERA is planning for a Next Generation communications system that will:
- Sustain reliability during 911 emergencies and major disasters
- Enhance coverage and other improvements
- Provide new radios with updated technology for first responders
- Improve response times due to hardware and software upgrades
- Comply with new regulations in force in the next few years
- Allow for expanded users and number of channels
- Offer regional interoperability in 10 Bay Area counties
- Relocate the MERA Master Prime Site (the centralized network core for the trunked and conventional radio resources, connectivity for dispatch functions and network management) from its existing location at the Marin County Civic Center to the Emergency Operations Center on Los Gamos in San Rafael, which has been structurally upgraded to meet the requirements of the California Essential Services (CES) standard

This project has been discussed by MERA for the past 4 years and at your Board’s August 6, 2013 workshop on MERA planning and implementation efforts. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was approved by your Board on January 17, 2014. The MOU outlines the Project’s general purpose, confirms the parties’ awareness of same and confirms their mutual cooperation. The MOU also defines the parties’ respective roles and relationship to the Project, describes Project revenue options and scheduling, discusses environmental review, includes a general financing plan, and sets forth planned outreach activities related to the Project.

The MOU references the Marin Emergency Radio Authority Next Generation Radio System Implementation Feasibility Study, December 11, 2013. This document is available on the MERA website at: http://www.meraonline.org/mera_docs.cfm.

As fiduciaries of the MERA county-wide public safety emergency communications system, the MERA Governing and Executive Boards, Finance, Project Oversight and Strategic Planning Committees, advisors and staff have invested thousands of hours and considerable financial resources in planning for MERA’s future and system replacement. Initial work on MERA’s Strategic Plan began in late 2009, the centerpiece
of which was system replacement in recognition of the approaching end of the current system's useful life.

MERA's 25 Member agencies have received presentations on the Next Generation Radio System, resulting in the adoption of Resolutions of Support for the Plan and proposed Parcel Tax to fund it by all 24 agencies (your Board being the 25th to consider this issue). Copies of the Resolutions are attached.

Since MERA has no authority to levy a special parcel tax, the MERA Governing Board adopted a Resolution on July 14, 2014 (attached) requesting the County to do so on its behalf. If funding can't be achieved via a parcel tax to replace the current system which is nearing the end of its useful life, some member agencies may opt out of MERA to achieve short-term savings. This would increase the cost to other agencies and result in a return to a fragmented, hodgepodge of communication systems.

The attached Resolution also includes the ballot question and Ordinance for voter approval. Upon passage of the measure, the Ordinance will be implemented by a post-election Agreement between MERA and the County of Marin, which will address the transfer of tax proceeds from the County to MERA and commit MERA to performing annual tax administration services (e.g., tax roll updates, processing exemption requests, levy calculations, database maintenance, County submittals, and reporting), compliance auditing and other related requirements.

Pursuant to the State California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines section 15378(b)(4), adoption of this resolution to place the parcel tax, a government funding mechanism, on the ballot for voter approval is not a project subject to the requirements of CEQA. Prior to commencement of any projects under this plan, any necessary environmental review required by CEQA shall be completed.

**Status of Other Agency Transitions to 700 MHz Systems**

Completed 700 MHz P25 Phase 2 systems:
- City and County of San Francisco – 2010
- San Francisco International Airport – 2011
- East Bay Region Communications System (Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, not including Oakland) – 2011
- Oakland – 2011
- San Mateo County – 2012
- Other California agencies: Riverside, San Diego

Currently Transitioning to 700MHz P25 Phase 2 Systems
- Golden Gate Bridge District

Currently Planning 700MHz P25 Phase 2 System projects
- Solano County – 700MHz Conventional 2012-2014
- Napa County – 700MHz Conventional 2012-2013
- Santa Clara County – 700MHz Conventional 2012-2014
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- Santa Cruz County – 700MHz Conventional 2012-2014  
- Nationwide agencies planning on using 700MHz is estimated to be greater than 100 agencies  

FISCAL IMPACT: MERA has agreed to pay for the incremental costs of having the measure on the November ballot. The incremental costs are estimated to be between $75,000 and $100,000.  

All MERA member agencies will cover the increase in operations and maintenance costs for the new system. With the commencement of operations of the new system in 2018, operations and maintenance costs are estimated to increase between 25 and 30%, due to inflation and the need to operate and maintain an expanded system.  

If the ballot measure to fund the capital project costs of the new system is not approved, MERA member agencies would also be responsible for covering both the increase in operating costs and the capital project costs. Among all MERA agencies, it is estimated that the required contribution would nearly double from $2.3 million to $4.4 million annually.  

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.  

REVIEWED BY:  
[ X ] Department of Finance  
[ ] County Counsel  
[ ] Human Resources  
[ X ] N/A  

Very truly yours,  

Craig Tackabery  
Assistant Director  
MERA Operations Officer  

Attachment