

CENTRAL MINNESOTA USER COMMITTEE
Tuesday, May 13, 2008, 6:30 p.m.
West Central Research and Outreach, Morris, MN
Stevens County

MEMBERS PRESENT:

1. Benton County – Marie Herbst
2. Douglas County – Tom Egan, Dave Pedersen, Dave Robley, Stephan Vanluik
3. Grant County – Chad Biss, Jon Combs, Matt Jensen
4. Kandiyohi County – Ace Bonnema, Brad Hanson
5. Meeker County – Rich Christianson, Joel Engler, Greg Gilbertson
6. Otter Tail County – Dallas Grewe, Mark Hovland, Mathew McGuire, Jim Rieber
7. Pope County – Jarod Swanson, David Thompson
8. City of St. Cloud – Gary Fletcher, Tom Justin, Chuck Koetter
9. Stearns County - Paul McIntyre, Jay Sikkink
10. Stevens County – Judy Diehl, Jason Dingman
11. Todd County - Bob Cuchna, James Kreemer, Steve Peterson, Kelly Saarela
12. Wadena County – Don Weniger

MEMBERS ABSENT:

13. Big Stone County
14. Mille Lacs County
15. Morrison County
16. Sherburne County
17. Swift County
18. Traverse County
19. Wilkin County
20. Wright County

CALL TO ORDER:

Meeting called to order by Chair Paul McIntyre at 6:37 p.m.

INTRODUCTIONS:

Chair McIntyre welcomed everyone and conducted introductions.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Dave Pedersen moved, second by Brad Hanson to approve minutes of April 8, 2008, upon a vote, motion carried.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Dave Pedersen stated a group meets at Douglas County on pandemics, etc., asked about purchasing radios and if it will be 800; Jay Sikkink stated his understanding is all counties in their region should be completed by next year and would include all of the preliminary towers. Dave stated the funds for their grant needs to be expended by July; Jay stated it is best to purchase 800 over VHF. Jay stated in his region, they have hospitals, ambulances, and schools that are going on 800. Dave stated it is public health and pandemics that are of concern, not the hospital and stated the 800 MHz is going to be state-wide. Ace said they could put scene of action in there, Jay stated there would be some communication concerns.

COMMUNICATIONS: (CONTINUED)

Tom Justin stated the State's plan is to have every existing State tower site to have 800 MHz equipment on by December 31st. Jay stated he didn't think the tower plan was on the website due to the National Republic Convention and concerns with towers published. He stated the map also includes proposed towers as well as existing and could provide the map at the next meeting. Tom Justin asked if someone from all entities will be at the RAC meeting on Friday as the maps will be distributed to the RAC representative. Debbie stated presently Wright County is the only entity not schedule to be at the RAC meeting on Friday.

INCIDENTS:

Chair McIntyre asked if anyone had any incidents since the last meeting – there were none.

REPORTS:

SRB/ARMER, RAC, OTC Update:

Jay stated approximately 20 tower sites were added to the plan, they are looking at adding more zone controllers. They are expecting to get approval by the State Radio Board.

RRB:

Micah Myers the State is getting \$14.6 million dollars and came up with nine investment justifications to spend the money and asked the RRB to give State the approval to allocate those funds.

It was stated that based on what individual counties have on record for per diem expenses would determine what the User Committee was allowed to get reimbursed as far as mileage and time. Jay stated it was up to each local entity to make that determination and not the RRB.

Micah stated the annual budget meeting is June 18th.

RAC:

Went through and discussed one of the main topics is background checks, as we get further out in the region, not every agency would have staff on board to program radios. Committee used State standard 4.10 Mark Englund from Otter Tail County has been working on the standard, there will be a data base set up so the information can be stored. The RAC had discussion on the MOU, considerable discussion on the county plans, and a list was drafted for the consultant and what they needed to complete.

OTC:

Jay reported they were suppose to meet this morning, although did not; currently working on getting plans in place to pass on to SRB. Another item they were looking at is the aviation i.e. LifeLink is on the system, aircraft statewide, how they are going to deal with them, and are discussing the best solution for aviation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS:

User Fees:

Micah stated if you are operating solely on the State backbone there are no user fees, user fees come in when you are operating on a local subsystem. St. Cloud has a subsystem and tries to minimize the cost to get individuals onto the system as there are software costs for upgrades. Jay stated Stearns County did a study on fees; in the Metro it is anywhere from \$300-\$400 per year per radio and there is a wide range of philosophies.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS: (CONTINUED)

User Fees: (Continued)

A couple of weeks ago Stearns County met with the County Commissioner and Administrator, and stated the cost is approximately \$20 per radio that the county is billed for maintenance to be on the system. The County use to absorb that costs although there are so many radios coming onto the system that they will be passing the \$20 on to the customer beginning in 2008. Jay stated the radios need to have the software updated and reloaded and currently they are absorbing the labor costs.

Jay said it is up to each county how they want to charge depending on what the county commissioners decide. Micah stated when you purchase radios they come with a warranty, although if a radio gets damaged, that is an additional fee. Andy Faith of Granite Electronics asked for clarification of the fees; Jay stated they went from \$0-\$500, some of the bigger counties were able to charge more as there are less volunteer entities and more City-owned and more easy to cost-share. In Stearns County 26 of the 27 Fire Departments are volunteer departments and have minimal funds available. Everyone's models will be different depending on what their commissioners come up with.

Tom Justin stated everyone needs to keep in mind that the State is building out by 2012, it will provide 95% coverage county by county and if you are operating on the State's backbone, you will not have a cost other than the software assurance and your costs from your IT or local radio shop; although after 2012 the legislation could change their mind. Micah stated the State is increasing the 911 fees to help fund this system and it should be implemented later this month. Jay stated their County Administrator stated the cost to maintain the VHF system is about \$50,000-\$60,000 per year and once Stearns County is all on 800, they can then utilize the funds for the 800 system. It is a cost savings in the long-run as you do not have to maintain two systems. The question was asked whether they need to keep the paging up and Jay stated yes; Tom Justin stated at least until Motorola develops a 800 pager that is small enough to put on your hip.

Interoperability – Patching ARMER to VHF Systems (Granit Electronics):

Dan McCoy, Granite Electronics, stated there are some agencies that have 800 MHz and still need to work with agencies that are on VHF and need to determine how they continue to communicate. He stated there is devices that are available which will bridge those two systems. Dan demonstrated a VHF and 800 MHz radio utilizing a device that patched the two systems together. He demonstrated the 800 to VHF and then the VHF back to the 800 indicating this is a system that may be used for a school district. Question was asked if the device only patches one channel, Dan stated there are many different devices, quite simply he could patch four radios together, i.e. two VHF to two talk groups, and stated it is very simple to utilize. Tom asked if this is something that can be utilized for a long period of time, Dan stated it is to be utilized for a transition time only. Dan stated it could be used to tie two rescue trucks together. He stated Stearns County has a mobile van that has a device in it for patching. Question was asked if the device could be at dispatch only, Dan stated it can be deployed or set in a dispatch center as it is versatile. Jay stated this helps in the area when someone is moving to 800 but is not converted yet. Jay stated Stearns County purchased two of them, the demonstration model is a portable one; Stearns County's com van is having consoles added to it.

Tom Justin stated currently there is no 800 MHz coverage in this area as there are no towers in this area. Tom stated he could turn his 800 MHz radios over to something such as SOA's and ran through the box, it could then theoretically be utilized with the VHF radios in this area. The same in St. Cloud they could take the VHF radios and patch to the 800 as that is the advantage of mobile patch boxes. Tom stated there are limitations to it, such as if he gets $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away from the portable device, it will be out of range – it is just like a walkie talkie.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS: (CONTINUED)

Interoperability – Patching ARMER to VHF Systems (Granit Electronics): (Continued)

Dan stated it is not a perfect solution although it is viable. Tom Egan stated there is a page on the console for example where Big Stone can make a click on the console and then South Dakota and the two can be linked together - the soft patch is very user friendly with the newer consoles. Dan cautioned agencies to do their homework as there are several other systems out there, make sure they are completing the delays, etc. in the patching devices. Jay stated Stearns County realized there are limitations; there is no way you can have everyone's primary channel on the VHF and 800 patched together. He stated the space on the consoles get filled up quickly. Dan stated to be careful when trying to patch state-wide channels as it will start bringing on other audio, i.e. when you are patching a statewide channel, it will tie up channels across the state. Chair McIntyre asked the approximate cost of a suitcase device as demonstrated, Dan stated approximately \$4,000 although there are some for as little as \$1,000. Jay stated the most challenging part of patching is having the correct cables. Brad Hanson stated they have something that ties the scene of actions together; another thing to remember when considering hospitals is there still will be a lot of small town ambulances and Fire Departments that will not be able to move to the 800 as quickly as other agencies and still will need to be able to communicate with them. Agencies will need to work with their county PSAPS in an effort to communicate as there are minimal grant dollars available such as in his area they have 23 different agencies.

Jay stated one thing they found out in Stearns County is the City of St. Cloud came on first; it took Stearns County four years to get everyone online. Now there are a couple of ambulances in Stearns County on 800, looking at how to communicate with the school buses, as they had an incident this winter that would have been good if they were on the system.

Paul stated at the last meeting there was a survey sent out and asked if you did not complete it to please do so. Debbie stated there was also a cross check with the RAC members to have them complete as well, Micah stated they are trying to complete an inventory within the region to determine what type of radios they have, how they are dispatching, etc. and identify how you are communicating. Micah stated we will be working through the contact for each PSAP to get the information.

Other Items of Interest:

Paul asked what members would like to discuss next month. Jay stated he can provide some documentation of the tower sites, etc. although he may not be able to attend; a suggestion was to discuss funding and grant writing. Micah stated part of the RRB budget includes professional services for helping to assist in writing grant proposals. Paul stated a lot of smaller agencies had luck in obtaining FEMA grants when several entities went together. Micah stated the OTC is also looking at different resources and once they are identified, they will be disbursed back to the region.

Gary Fletcher stated departments who did not receive grants, take a look at verbage that another agency wrote who did receive one as there are certain key words that they are looking for. Micah stated on the Central MN Radio website there are the Kandiyohi and Sherburne/Wright grants that can be utilized as examples. Tom Justin stated Gary Curtis of Waite Park was the author of a grant and he will send out Gary's contact information. He stated all of the RAC members are well aware of the variety of grants available and members should contact their RAC representative. There is money coming to the RRB in the near future to be divided up in the State and they will need to make a determination of where the money is spent, and they will be looking for direction from this group and the RAC. Tom stated currently he is the representative on the RRB and please talk to him.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS: (CONTINUED)

Other Items of Interest: (Continued)

Tom stated he feels the State will be on schedule to get the 800 equipment hanging on all of the existing towers by the end of 2008. He stated a tower in Gilman took care of mainly all of Benton County so they do not need to build additional towers. The money that is coming available is not enough to put radios in everyone's hands who would like one; he is in the understanding that funding will be available each year for the next several years. The issue of funding will have to be prioritized and he provided a couple of different scenarios as to how the build out could work and he stated input is required and needed. There is Homeland Security funds available to be spent and are waiting for a plan for disbursement. Jay stated it took Stearns County four years for the build out and stated it will be a process.

Gary stated in St. Cloud they would have liked to put a radio in every firefighter's hands although that was not possible, although they were able to put a radio in every seat and have 12 spares. He stated there is money available in the next couple of years, yet individuals need to get onto the system. Everyone needs to look a little bit further, will someone take better care of a radio knowing that someone else will be utilizing that same radio. Question was asked if someone has an 800 MHz radio and want to see if it will work in their county, is there a channel they can utilize and Tom Justin stated there is CMROAM they can use and stated if counties know where there is a State tower in their county, by the end of the year there will be 800 MHz equipment on there. It was asked if the radio can be just turned on or does it have to go through a programmer; Jay stated it is just like a computer, it will have to be programmed and loaded into the system. He stated the radio could be programmed for a talk group for their county then it would not affect anyone else. Tom Justin stated first they would need to have the radio programmed; individuals then need to have training before they are allowed to use the radios on the system and either him self or Bob Dickhaus could provide this training within an hour. Tom Justin stated in Motley the radio worked just fine, he has a button on his radio he can push which will tell him what tower he is on. Camp Ripley is a site that is now tied to the zone controller in St. Cloud. Bruce DeBlieck stated they have brought on a site in Brainerd. Tom Justin stated he will contact Bob to send out an email be sent out notifying everyone when a new site is being put online.

Gary Vosberg, Monticello Ambulance stated they are ready to purchase radios and get them programmed. Jay stated Dave Pikal of Sherburne County would be able to help them get the radios programmed up. Tom Egan asked if for the next meeting, could something be put together as to how we can create a patch for the smaller agencies perhaps for a year's timeframe. Jay stated they probably would not want to patch everyone and perhaps use one channel as otherwise it gets too difficult, perhaps go to a Mutual Aid channel and use that to patch; he started it took Stearns County a long time to figure out what would work the best. Brad Hanson stated for example in Willmar there will be some type of hard patch needed. Tom Justin stated once Stearns made an 800 MHz patch, it was hard patched in the console for several years. Jay stated Benton County did the same thing and they are utilizing it as a migration strategy.

Jay stated another thing they are looking at in the Metro is they have an East and West control center and Stearns County is looking at the same concept in Central MN. It costs approximately \$100,000 and another \$20,000 per year to maintain a RCC in Central MN. He explained if a hospital or ambulance would contact the RCC, the RCC would then patch them to where they needed.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS: (CONTINUED)

Other Items of Interest: (Continued)

Micah stated the RCC was funded through the 911 fees, he talked to Ron Whitehead; if we were implementing this in Central MN we would need to communicate with legislation as they provided that for the Metro and should be able to provide the same for outstate; the legislature needs to know the importance of this system. Brad Hanson stated West Metro is willing work outstate and asked if it would be worthwhile to invest in another RCC or could we work with the West Metro and build off of that.

Gary Vosdberg stated he worked for North Memorial for 26 years in Metro and it is a phenomenal system and it would be a great benefit if we could get it set up in Central MN. It is not just great for hospitals, it was also utilized with the bridge collapse and the bus accident - it is a very good system and works very well. Jay stated we will need to utilize individuals such as Gary who have experience to help set it up. He stated at the St. Cloud Hospital they have someone in dispatch staffed 24 hours a day and have offered to take on that task. Jay stated he would greatly appreciate the help in getting it set up in Central MN; he stated EMS has different regions than the 800. Brad stated West Metro has been very good to work with even in Willmar and there are a lot of advantages in having a central communications center; he stated Lance Ross was recently hired and perhaps he would be a good person to help.

Gary Fletcher stated a possible way to save money for small Fire Departments and works so well that the City of St. Cloud had a mobile radio in the truck, a remote, and then a portable; it works so well now they have eliminated the remote and it is money savings and could be an option. Brad stated there is savings by just having portables versus portables and mobiles. There are USDA grants available that may be another option, especially for a small town they may be eligible for up to 75% match.

Jay stated there are maps available for county by county for towers and he had the state-wide map and passed it around.

Zone controller was moved to St. Cloud and will become active. Jay stated the four RSSI sites are being moved tonight, one bank of consoles tomorrow morning and the rest the next morning. Andy stated zone 4 name will change.

UPCOMING MEETINGS:

June 10, 1:00 p.m.:

The next meeting will be June 10, 2008 at 1:00 p.m. at the Swift County Law Enforcement Center, in Benson, MN, Swift County.

July 8, 6:30 p.m.:

The July meeting will be July 8, 2008 at 6:30 p.m. in Todd County – location to be determined.

ADJOURNMENT:

Brad Hanson moved, second Tom Egan to adjourn meeting at 8:11 p.m., motion carried.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Debbie Backes, Recording Secretary.