

**ROSS VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT  
STAFF REPORT**

For the meeting of: April 9, 2014

To: Board of Directors  
From: Mark E. Mills, Fire Chief  
Subject: MERA Funding

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that the Board pass the proposed resolution supporting the MERA Tax Measure.

**DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS:**

The attached staff report has been developed by David Jeffries, MERA Special Project Manager (Attachment A). Mr. Jefferies will be presenting the information to the Board tonight in hopes of solidifying support for the proposed tax measure.

**Conclusion:** The MERA system has to be upgraded in order to maintain effective communications for all emergency responders in Marin County. If the tax measure is approved, the additional cost will spread throughout the County to the end users. If the tax measure does not pass, the upgrade costs will be borne by the member agencies resulting in possible local tax increases to cover the expenses.

AGENDA ITEM # 4  
Date 4/9/14



## RESOLUTION 14-04

### A RESOLUTION OF THE ROSS VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT BOARD OF DIRECTORS SUPPORTING AND ENDORSING THE LEVY OF PARCEL TAX TO FINANCE A NEW COUNTYWIDE PUBLIC SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM

#### SECTION 1. FINDINGS

Whereas the Ross Valley Fire Department Board of Directors does hereby find and declare the following:

- I. Public safety and emergency radio communications are vital to our first responders and the communities they serve. Public safety and emergency radio communications in our jurisdiction are currently provided by our membership in the Marin Emergency Radio Authority.
- II. The Marin Emergency Radio Authority is a joint exercise of powers agency comprised of the City of Belvedere, Bolinas Fire Protection District, Town of Corte Madera, Town of Fairfax, Inverness Public Utility District, Kentfield Fire Protection District, City of Larkspur, County of Marin, Marin Community College District, Marinwood Community Services District, City of Mill Valley, Novato Fire Protection District, City of Novato, Town of Ross, Ross Valley Fire Department, Town of San Anselmo, City of San Rafael, City of Sausalito, Southern Marin Fire District, Town of Tiburon, Tiburon Fire Protection district, Central Marin Police Authority, Marin County Transit District, Marin Municipal Water District, and Stinson Beach Fire District, existing as an entity separate from its member agencies and organized under California Government Code Sections 6500, et seq., for the purpose of constructing and operating a countywide public safety and emergency radio system in the County of Marin.
- III. The Marin Emergency Radio Authority has determined the need to replace the existing countywide public safety and emergency radio system as a result of several factors that include the age and obsolescence of the current system, user demand exceeds the current system's capacity, the current system cannot meet new FCC standards that are effective in 2017, and federal law that requires that the current public safety and emergency radio frequencies be turned back to the federal government in 2021. The Marin Emergency Radio Authority plans to have a new replacement system operational in 2018 to ensure reliable public safety and emergency radio communications.
- IV. On December 11, 2013, the Governing Board of the Marin Emergency Radio Authority approved a project financing plan that includes the levy of a parcel tax (the "Parcel Tax") to finance the capital costs of the new system to offset such costs to its member agencies. The proposed Parcel Tax is \$29.00 annually per parcel for a single family residence, and varies based on land use, such as multi-family housing, commercial, industrial and agricultural uses, and includes an exemption for income-qualified senior homeowners. The Parcel Tax is scheduled to be submitted to Marin County voters at the November 4, 2014 election.
- V. On December 11, 2013, the Governing Board of the Marin Emergency Radio Authority further approved the establishment of an Independent Citizen Oversight Committee to review the collection and expenditure of the Parcel Tax revenues. The Committee would consist of at least five members, who would be residents of Marin County.

**SECTION 2. RESOLUTION**

Now, therefore, based on the findings contained in Section 1 above, the Ross Valley Fire Department Board of Directors does hereby resolve to support and endorse the ParcelTax as approved by the Governing Board of the Marin Emergency Radio Authority Governing Board.

**SECTION 3. VOTE**

PASSED AND ADOPTED at a regular board meeting of the Ross Valley Fire Department, Board of Directors, held on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of April, 2014 by the following vote to-wit:

AYES:

NAYES:

ABSTENTIONS:

ABSENT:

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President

ATTEST:

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Administrative Assistant



**MERA STAFF REPORT**

MEETING

DATE: April 9, 2014

TO: Ross Valley Fire District Board of Directors

FROM: David Jeffries, MERA Special Project Manager

SUBJECT: **MARIN EMERGENCY RADIO AUTHORITY  
(MERA) – NEXT GENERATION: REQUEST TO  
SUPPORT AND ENDORSE A PARCEL TAX TO  
FUND THE NEXT GENERATION PUBLIC SAFETY  
COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM**

**REQUEST:**

Receive a presentation on the proposed funding mechanism for the second generation Marin Emergency Radio Authority public safety communications system and approve a Resolution supporting and endorsing the proposed parcel tax as the funding mechanism for capital costs of this project.

**DISCUSSION:**

**1. Introduction:**

Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) is a collection of 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. All Marin County public safety agencies can communicate through MERA, including police departments, fire departments, public works departments, animal control, transportation agencies and parks departments. MERA provides crucial public safety communications to 25 member agencies, both day-to-day and during and after a major emergency or natural disaster.

In addition to the Marin County agencies there are a number of partner agencies that include the California Highway Patrol dispatch, Golden Gate Transit dispatch, US Coast Guard, Petaluma Police dispatch, Sonoma County Sheriff dispatch, State Emergency Management and Mutual Aid, to name a few.

MERA radio communications is the backbone of the 911 emergency response system. It provides the communications link between 911 public safety dispatch centers and the field units that respond to emergencies.

MERA and local Police and Fire Chiefs provided a presentation in the fall of 2013 to all MERA member agencies describing the status of the Gen I system and plans for the Gen II system.



## 2. Why the MERA Gen I System Must Be Upgraded:

The current Gen I system will face several significant risks over the next few years. The “history” of MERA can be traced back to 1995 when the County of Marin initiated a “needs assessment” for a countywide radio system. Over the course of the next few years, outreach and feasibility studies were conducted and an Oversight Committee was created. In 1998 “MERA” was officially formed. In February 1999, the MERA Board authorized the sale of bonds in the amount of \$26,940,000 to finance the first MERA radio system. The system was designed to accommodate 1,580 mobile and portable radios with expansion capacity to 2,500 radios. As we look to replace the Gen I system in 2018, the key risks are listed below:

- **Reliability** – The current system was designed in 1998 and has been in service since 2004. By 2018, it will be 20 years past its design phase and will have been in service for 14 years. Key components are no longer being manufactured and MERA is finding it increasingly difficult to locate replacement equipment. While MERA believes we can maintain a reliable system until 2018, system reliability will continue to decrease over time.
- **Capacity** – The Gen I system was designed to gradually increase to 2,500 users over 20 years. We are already past that mark at nearly 2,900 users with requests for additional radios on a regular basis.
- **Coverage** – We have been aware of areas that could greatly benefit from increased coverage. Key areas of concern have been in Southern Marin and West Marin.
- **Out of Compliance** – While the MERA Gen I system has been capable of upgrades to meet evolving FCC technical requirements, the Gen I system will not be capable of meeting new ‘narrow-banding’ requirements that will be in place in 2017.
- **Frequency Give Back** – Even if MERA could address all of the above risks, the FCC is now requiring that MERA give back its current UHF-T band frequencies in 2021.

It is this array of risks, taken in combination, which has driven MERA’s proposed Gen II system. The bottom line is that the Gen I system is approaching a time in which we will not be able to sustain the system and it needs to be replaced. To meet our “go-live” target of 2018, the replacement project needs to begin in 2015 with a solid funding source.

## 3. The Generation II System:

To mitigate the impending risks and to allow MERA and its member agencies to maintain a reliable public safety and emergency communications system, MERA has developed a proposal for a Next Generation (Gen II) communications system with the following features:

- **Response Times** - Reduce 911 response times with an upgraded radio network, better technology and additional user capacity. This will also reduce MERA radio user wait times, by reducing busy signals during major events.
- **Coverage** - Reduce response times and improve safety in certain areas of the county through additional coverage areas. The Gen II proposal includes two additional sites in Southern Marin and two additional sites in West Marin.



- **Increased Reliability** - Provide upgraded radios, radio network, and dispatch consoles with the latest software, with streamlined user interfaces for maximum efficiency.
- **Compliance** - Comply with new federal regulations in force over the next few years.
- **Move to 700 MHz** - Offering regional interoperability throughout the Bay Area with a move to a 700 MHz system and additional access to the 800 MHz frequencies.
- **New Radios** – Up-to-date radios and technology, supported by a more modern infrastructure, such as GPS tracking of resources as a potential example, that will be provided to first responder and safety personnel.

#### 4. Generation II Funding:

The current MERA system was purchased using bonds that have obligations to the member agencies until year 2021. Using this method of funding the Generation II system would require MERA member agencies to provide annual funding for the Generation II bonds, beginning in FY 15/16 and ending in FY 35/36.

To minimize the impacts to local government budgets for the Next Generation system, several funding alternatives have been explored. As mentioned in the Round I presentation, MERA did look at different funding mechanisms, such as a sales tax or general obligation bond, but found much less community support for those options. Additional potential funding alternatives include grants and low interest loans, and a parcel tax. MERA has selected a parcel tax as the best and most viable option available to raise the necessary funds to successfully complete the project.

This does not mean that the County and MERA have not been seeking grant funds. In fact, Marin County has been successful in securing over \$6,000,000 in grants for the Next Generation system. Grants have supported system design studies, and the installation of backbone radio elements, dispatch consoles and microwave components. However, we do not believe that grant funding will cover all of the costs of the Next Generation system, nor do we believe it prudent to presume any particular level of grant funding into the future. We will continue to look for grant opportunities that could potentially reduce the level of parcel tax in the future as well as opportunities to minimize operating and maintenance costs.

At the same time, we are very concerned about the impact of the Parcel Tax failing to pass. If that should occur, MERA and its member agencies would need to either quickly find another funding mechanism, such as the traditional or existing method of MERA member contributions described later, or having each MERA member possibly licensing and funding their own communications systems, while trying to cooperate in some means of creating interoperability across multiple systems with limited coverage.

The County of Marin is the legal entity that must place the parcel tax on the ballot as MERA itself does not have the legal authority to do so. Bonds in the amount of \$46 million need to be issued to provide adequate funding for the new system.



5. Generation II Budget:

The proposed budget for the MERA Generation II system is \$40 million, with an additional \$6.3 million in additional bond costs. This assumes a reuse of building and towers were appropriate as well as a 1 for 1 replacement of field radios for MERA member agencies.

Site Development and Upgrades, Environmental Compliance, Licensing & Leases	\$10.6M
Radio Communication System, Site Equipment and Dispatch Consoles	\$13.9M
Microwave System	\$5.0M
Mobile and Portable Radios	\$10.5M
<b>SUBTOTAL CAPITAL COSTS ( Includes Contingency)</b>	<b>\$40.0M</b>
Bond Capitalized Interest	\$2.3M
Bond Reserve Fund	\$3.6M
Bond Issuance Costs	\$0.4M
<b>TOTAL BOND ISSUANCE</b>	<b>\$46.3M</b>

(All figures are in millions)

To provide an illustration of the potential impacts on MERA member agencies from the traditional vs. Parcel Tax means of funding the Gen II system, the following table and charts were developed. MERA first looked at using the same mechanism as was used for the Gen I bond funding, with costs spread equally across twenty years. This resulted in a significant impact during the first several years of Gen II funding that overlap with the final years of Gen I funding. This model was shared during the Round I presentations.

Recognizing the impacts of that model, MERA has looked at an alternative for Gen II funding should the Parcel Tax fail to pass. In this model, a smoothing technique is used in which MERA members would make interest only payments from FY 15/16 thru FY 21/22, reducing the impacts of these overlapping years, with payments being caught up in the remaining thirteen years. It is this model that is illustrated below. It should be noted that MERA has adopted the Parcel Tax as its method to fund the Gen II system and that the Gen II figures below are provided as an illustration of the potential impacts should the Parcel Tax fail to pass.

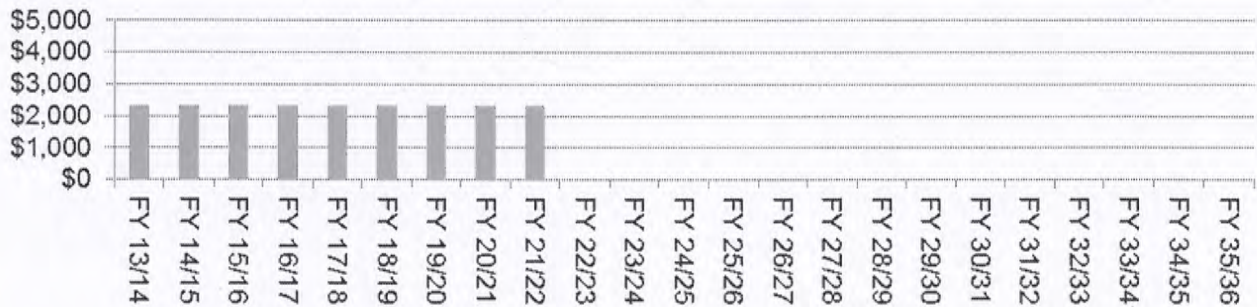
**Annual MERA System-wide Capital Costs if Parcel Tax Fails to Pass (Gen II with smoothing):**

	FY 13/14	FY 14/15	FY 15/16	FY 16/17	FY 17/18	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	FY 20/21	FY 21/22	FY 22/23
Gen I	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	\$2,347	
Gen II			\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$4,400
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,347</b>	<b>\$2,347</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,547</b>	<b>\$4,400</b>

(All figures are in thousands)

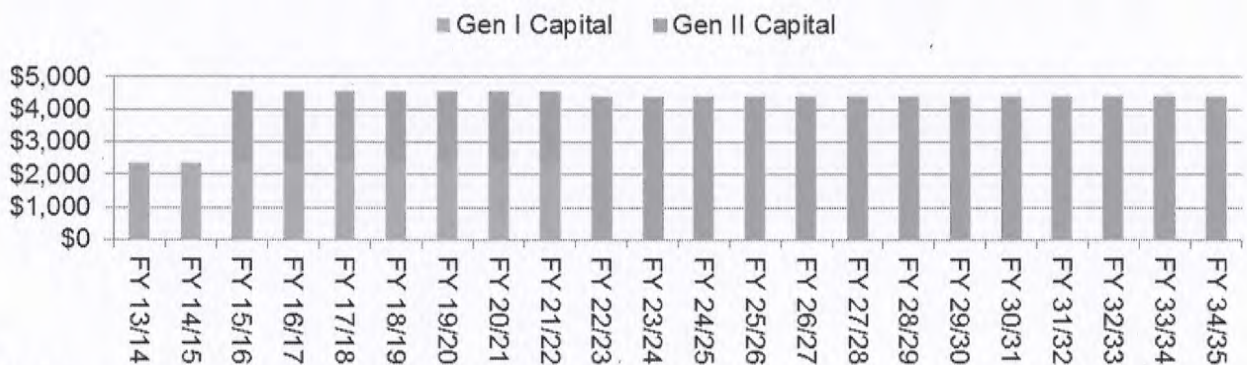


**Annual MERA System-wide Capital Costs if the Parcel Tax Wins Approval:**



(All figures are in thousands)

**Annual MERA System-wide Capital Costs if Parcel Tax Fails to Pass with Smoothing:**



(All figures are in thousands)

It should be noted that MERA has not adopted a traditional or smoothed mechanism for funding of the Gen II system as we believe the Parcel Tax method best serves our member agencies, but these mechanisms are included in this report to illustrate the need to focus the efforts and energies of MERA and our member agencies on the success of the Parcel Tax proposal.

**6. Operating and Maintenance Estimates:**

During the MERA Round I presentations, there were a number of requests for information on Operating and Maintenance costs as we move forward. Looking at our current costs and those of other similar systems, MERA staff has developed estimates through FY 2022. These costs, impacted by both inflation and the need to operate and maintain an expanded system, show an average annualized increase of 7.4%.

As you review these figures, please keep two caveats in mind: first, that the future Operating and Maintenance costs are educated estimates; second, that the individual figures for local



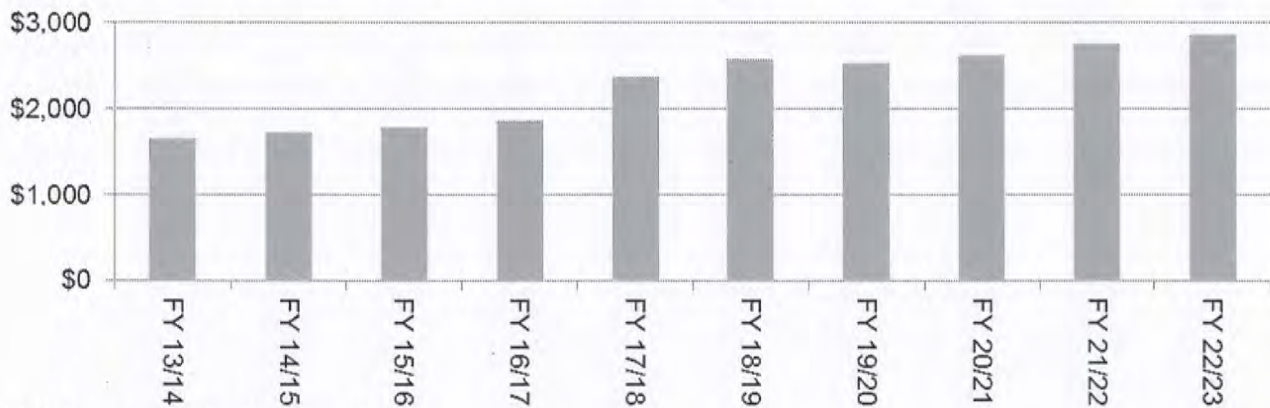
jurisdictions (later in this staff report) assume that there will be no additional MERA members or changes to the cost-sharing mechanism.

**Estimated MERA System-wide Operations and Maintenance Costs thru FY 22/23:**

FY 13/14	FY 14/15	FY 15/16	FY 16/17	FY 17/18	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	FY 20/21	FY 21/22	FY 22/23
\$1,650	\$1,728	\$1,795	\$1,866	\$2,374	\$2,580	\$2,536	\$2,624	\$2,753	\$2,870

(All figures are in thousands)

**Estimated MERA System-wide Operations and Maintenance Costs thru FY 22/23:**



(All figures are in thousands)

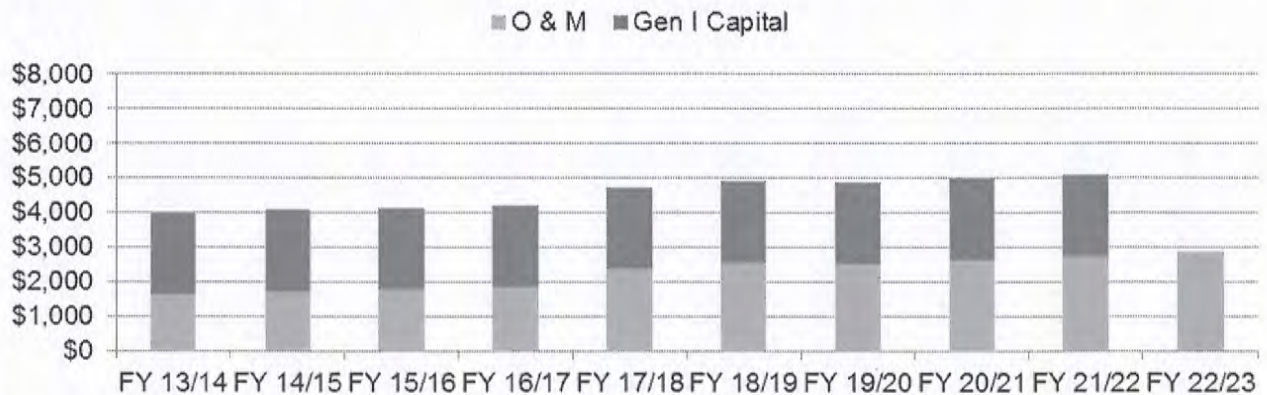
One option MERA is considering is a Service Upgrade Agreement (SUA). As an example of a SUA, MERA would receive bi-annual system and technology upgrades for the first ten years of the system’s life. We currently estimate that this option could increase MERA’s Operating and Maintenance costs by \$450,000 per year over the first ten years of the Gen II system while putting MERA in an upgraded position as the Gen II system enters its second decade. We anticipate asking that potential vendors provide a separate description and cost description from the core project proposal to allow MERA to evaluate the value of this additional feature.

**7. Combined Cost Impacts:**

With the additional information of the Operating and Maintenance estimations, we can also look at the combined costs of the Gen I, Gen II and Operating and Maintenance costs to further illustrate the importance of the Parcel Tax proposal on MERA member agencies. The following charts show the total of the Gen I Bonds with Operating and Maintenance, should the Parcel Tax pass, and then the combined costs of Gen I and Gen II with Operating and Maintenance costs should the Parcel Tax fail as well as with the smoothing formula. As the Operating and Maintenance estimates go thru FY 2022, these graphs show the impact through that fiscal year.

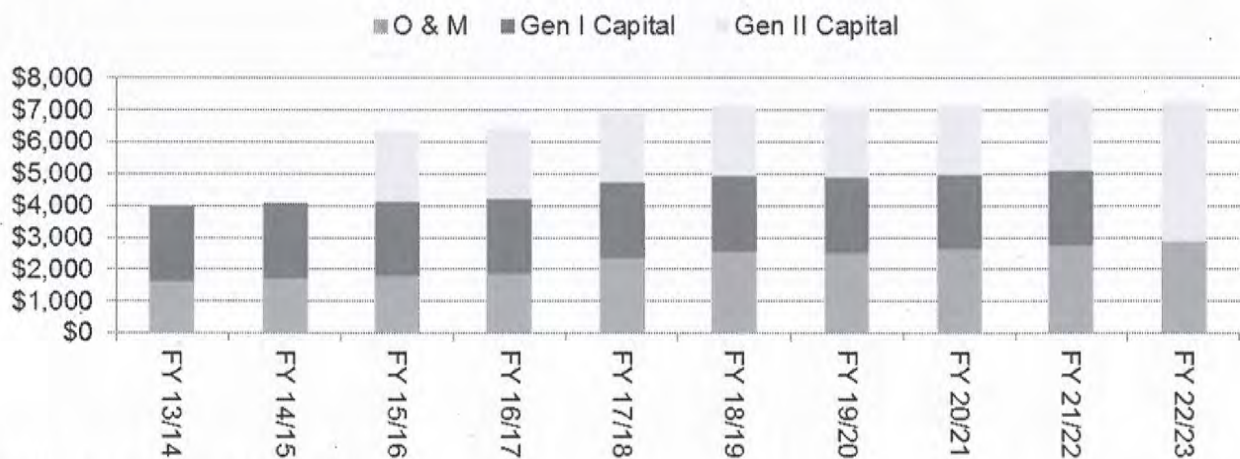


**Annual Capital and O&M MERA System-wide Member Costs if the Parcel Tax Passes:**



(All figures are in thousands)

**Annual Capital and O&M MERA System-wide Member Costs if the Parcel Tax Fails with Smoothing:**



(All figures are in thousands)

**8. MERA Member Agency Expense Estimates:**

The data included in this section are estimates developed for your agency. As a reminder, the Generation I bond cost is based on the current costs and adopted funding mechanism. The Generation II cost above assumes the Parcel Tax fails AND that there are no changes in the current MERA funding mechanisms for distribution of costs across member agencies and that with the smoothing model there is an assumption of interest only payments for seven years with increased annual costs for the remaining thirteen years. Lastly, the Operating and Maintenance cost is based on existing current costs and an educated estimate for future years that also assumes that MERA member costs will be distributed as are Generation I bond costs.



a. Generation I Bond Costs: \$50,000 annually thru FY 21/22.

b. Generation II Bond Costs with Smoothing: \$47,000 annually from FY 15/16 thru FY 21/22 and \$95,000 from FY 22/23 thru FY 35/36.

c. Operating and Maintenance Costs: (Estimated)

FY 13/14	FY 14/15	FY 15/16	FY 16/17	FY 17/18	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	FY 20/21	FY 21/22	FY 22/23
\$35	\$37	\$39	\$40	\$51	\$55	\$55	\$56	\$59	\$62

(All figures in thousands)

d. Parcel Tax Passes: Gen I Bond Costs and Operating and Maintenance Costs:  
(Estimated)

FY 13/14	FY 14/15	FY 15/16	FY 16/17	FY 17/18	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	FY 20/21	FY 21/22	FY 22/23
\$85	\$87	\$89	\$90	\$101	\$105	\$105	\$106	\$109	\$62

(All figures in thousands)

e. Parcel Tax Fails: Gen I and II Bond Costs and Operating and Maintenance Costs With Smoothing: (Estimated)

FY 13/14	FY 14/15	FY 15/16	FY 16/17	FY 17/18	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	FY 20/21	FY 21/22	FY 22/23
\$85	\$87	\$136	\$137	\$148	\$152	\$152	\$153	\$156	\$157

(All figures in thousands)

#### 9. Latest Polling Data:

MERA has recently conducted a second public opinion survey. This survey focused on the details of the Parcel Tax as described in this staff report. As mentioned in the Round I presentations, the 2013 survey was broad based and helped to develop the funding proposal. The findings of the January 2014 survey include: (Poll conducted 01/26-29/14 with 400 surveys and a margin of error of 4.5%)

- Support for a \$29 parcel tax measure is marginally higher than the \$45 measure tested in 2012.
- However, support still falls short of the two-thirds vote threshold both initially (62%) and after positive arguments (64%).
- The lowering of the Parcel Tax to \$29 was offset by the diminished concern about the need for reliable emergency communications among respondents.
- The two strongest arguments in favor of a measure cite the need for communications during a natural disaster and highlight how a new system would improve 911 response times.



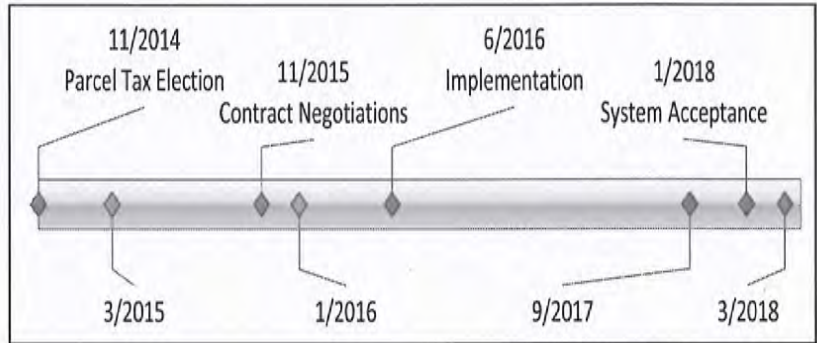
- A public information effort is needed to raise awareness of the importance of the MERA system and the need to replace the current system with the Gen II system.

By the time that the second round of presentations is complete, MERA will have delivered 48 presentations throughout Marin County on the future of the MERA system and the need for the Generation II system, with public, council and board feedback. In addition, MERA has already held 11 Strategic Plan development meetings and 56 implementation meetings. This work has been accomplished by the MERA Governing Board, Executive Board, Project Oversight Committee, Finance Committee, Governance Workgroup and the Operations and System Technology Workgroup.

MERA will also be conducting a proactive public education campaign, including firefighters, police and direct community outreach, from April thru June to increase public awareness of MERA and the critical importance of this project.

10. Tentative Gen II Project Timeline:

- 11/2014: Parcel Tax Election
- 03/2015: Request for Proposal
- 11/2015: Contract Negotiations
- 01/2016: Detailed Design Review
- 06/2016: Begin Implementation
- 09/2017: System Cutover
- 01/2018: System Acceptance
- 03/2018: Project Completion



11. Parcel Tax Details:

The Parcel Tax has been developed by the MERA Finance Committee and is based on a study by NBS. The Parcel Tax details for different property types are shown below.

**Proposed Parcel Tax Rates:**

Property Description	Method	Maximum Rate
Single-Family Residential	Per Parcel	\$29.00
Multi-Family Residential	Per Unit	\$26.10
Agricultural		
Up to 5 Acres – Small	Per Parcel	\$29.00
Greater than 5 acres – Large	Per Parcel	\$58.00
Commercial, Industrial and Utility		
Up to ½ acre	Per Parcel	\$87.00
Greater than ½ acre & up to 1 acre	Per Parcel	\$174.00
Greater than 1 acre	\$174 per parcel + \$29/acre	Up to cap of \$2,500.00



**Parcel Tax Revenues by Category:**

<b>Parcel Tax Categories</b>	<b># of Parcels</b>	<b>Tax Units</b>	<b>Total Parcel Tax</b>	<b>Average per Parcel</b>	<b>Median</b>
Single Family	81,107	81,107	\$2,352,103	\$29	\$29
Multi-Family	4,986	24,551	\$640,791	\$129	\$52
Agricultural	715	1,361	\$39,469	\$55	\$58
Commercial, Industrial & Utility	4,015	10,360	\$585,193	\$145	\$87

The proposed parcel tax will include exemptions for income qualified senior homeowners. The parcel tax proposal also includes the formation of an Independent Citizen Oversight Committee that shall review the collection and expenditure of tax revenues collected under the authority of the parcel tax measure.

During the latter half of 2013, all MERA member agencies were provided with an overview of the system, the current challenges and the proposed solution and funding mechanism. As a result of that process and the feedback received, MERA reviewed and updated the proposal, with the MERA Governing Board approving the updated plan on 12/11/2013. The current action plan for the project is that beginning in February, 2014 through June, 2014 each MERA member agency will be asked to formally endorse the project funding plan for the Next Generation MERA system. In July, 2014, a request will be made to the County of Marin Board of Supervisors to put a countywide parcel tax measure on the ballot in November, 2014.

**ACTION ITEM:**

With the support of all of the MERA member agencies, we will be able to continue and improve our countywide public safety communications system for years to come with a Parcel Tax based on a single-family residence assessment of just \$29 per year. With your support, we can build on the already strong public support identified in our polling and help inform our community of the importance of this Parcel Tax on the November 2014 ballot.

MERA would like to reiterate that the Gen I system needs to be replaced in 2018 and while that is still four years away, it will be a busy four years. Delays will increase the risk of degraded public safety communications and equipment failure. MERA also believes that the successful passage of the Parcel Tax is in the best interest of MERA and for your organization in order to fund this critical project.

To that end, MERA is requesting that each MERA member agency pass a resolution to support and endorse the proposed MERA Parcel Tax. The attached resolution is being provided to each MERA member agency with the intent that all of the resolutions will be provided to the Marin County Board of Supervisors as MERA seeks to have the Parcel Tax placed on the November 2014 ballot.



**FISCAL IMPACT:**

None at this time, but significant potential costs should the Parcel Tax fail.

**ALTERNATIVES:**

Do not approve the Resolution of Support for the MERA Parcel Tax.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Draft Resolution



# NERA

Marin Emergency  
Radio Authority



## WE'RE CONNECTED FOR YOUR SAFETY:

All Marin County public safety agencies can communicate through MERA, including police departments, fire departments, public works departments, animal control, transportation agencies and parks departments!

### NERA MEMBERS:

- County of Marin
- City of Belvedere
- Town of Corte Madera
- Town of Fairfax
- City of Larkspur
- City of Mill Valley
- City of Novato
- Town of Ross
- Town of San Anselmo
- City of San Rafael
- City of Sausalito
- Town of Tiburon
- Bolinas Fire Protection District
- Central Marin Police Authority
- Inverness Public Utility Dist.
- Kentfield Fire Protection District
- Marin Community College Dist.
- Marin Municipal Water District
- Marin Transit
- Marinwood Community Services District
- Novato Fire Protection District
- Ross Valley Fire Department
- Southern Marin Fire Prot. Dist.
- Stinson Beach Fire Prot. Dist.
- Tiburon Fire Protection Dist.

### PARTNER AGENCIES:

- CHP Dispatch Channels
- Golden Gate National Recreation Area Dispatch
- Golden Gate Transit Dispatch
- National Mutual Aid
- Petaluma Police Dispatch
- Sonoma Sheriff Dispatch
- State Emergency Management
- State Mutual Aid
- US Coast Guard

## IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT NERA SERVICES

### MISSION:

NERA is a collection of 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 to 25 member agencies, both day-to-day and after a major emergency or natural disaster.

### ABOUT:

NERA 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.

### BUDGET:

Annual Operating Budget is \$1,651,432 in FY2013/14.

### CHALLENGE:

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 getting older and we must plan for a replacement system to ensure we can maintain our reliable emergency communications.

### SOLUTION:

NERA is planning for a Next Generation communications system that will:

- ✓ Sustain reliability during 911 emergencies and major disasters
- ✓ Enhance coverage due to more tower sites 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

### FUTURE COST:

Approximately \$40 million, which would be financed with a parcel tax bond issuance, requiring a two-thirds vote for passage. Based on our current estimates, we anticipate the cost for a single-family residence to be approximately \$2.50 per month. We are also including a low-income exemption for seniors and a Citizen's Oversight Committee.

Rev. 3/5/14

For more information, please visit MERA's website at [meraonline.org](http://meraonline.org)



# **MERA**

**Marin Emergency  
Radio Authority**



## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT MERA**

### **1. What is MERA?**

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) is a Joint Powers Authority in Marin County formed in 1998 to plan, implement and manage a countywide public safety and emergency radio system for the use of all member agencies. Twenty-five member agencies use MERA routinely, encompassing every agency dealing with public safety in Marin County. Several other public safety partners also have access to the MERA communication system, including California Highway Patrol, Golden Gate Bridge District, Marin Humane Society, Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the Coast Guard.

### **2. Can I use it in an emergency?**

Yes, you use it every time you call 911. MERA radio communications is the backbone of the 911 emergency response system. However, it is strictly for use by authorized public safety agencies and providers and cannot be used by private citizens. This is meant to ensure enough bandwidth is available during emergencies so lives can be saved in the most severe of disasters, including earthquake, flood or wildfire. 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.

### **3. What challenges does MERA face?**

The system was designed in 1998 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 total that was originally anticipated over the 20-year life of the system. The current system is not only used more extensively than expected, it is getting older and we must plan for a replacement system to ensure reliable emergency communications, both day-to-day and after a major emergency or natural disaster.

### **4. What would we gain with a Next Generation System?**

- ✓ Sustained reliability during 911 emergencies and major disasters
- ✓ Better coverage due to more tower sites and other improvements
- ✓ New radios with updated technology for first responders
- ✓ Improved response times due to hardware and software upgrades
- ✓ Compliance with new regulations in force in the next few years
- ✓ Ability to expand users and number of channels
- ✓ Regional interoperability

### **5. How will the Next Gen Radio System reduce 911 Response Times?**

- ✓ The Next Gen system will provide upgraded radio network and dispatch console systems with the latest software, with streamlined user interfaces for maximum efficiency
- ✓ The Next Gen system will reduce MERA radio user wait times, by adding more capacity and reducing busy signals during major events
- ✓ The Next Gen system will reduce emergency response times for some areas of the county with poor coverage, by improving coverage and response
- ✓ The Next Gen system simulcast configuration will reduce MERA radio user wait times, by adding more capacity and reducing busy signals during major events

### **6. Do my tax dollars pay for this service?**

With the current system, MERA services are paid by member agencies, which are funded by tax dollars. The funding was designed so that each agency, and by extension each taxpayer, pays their fair share for the services they receive. For the Next Generation system, we are exploring a parcel tax paid directly by taxpayers to fund capital improvements. This would reduce the immediate impacts a capital plan would have on individual agencies, but member agencies would still have to pay for operating and replacement costs.

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**For more information, please visit MERA's website at [meronline.org](http://meronline.org)**



**7. Can we use parts of the current system with the Next Generation system?**

Yes. We intend to re-use as much as we can, but the primary re-use will be structures and tower sites – which is a large capital investment we retain from the last generation of MERA. Much of the technological equipment, however, will be at the end of its life cycle by the time the Next Gen system is up and running. In addition, we need to maintain the current MERA system during construction of the Next Gen system and until all MERA users have completed their transition to the new system.

**8. These systems seem expensive. What are the costs based on?**

The system is comprised of different parts that work together seamlessly to support our entire public safety communications network. This system supports not a single agency, but 25 member agencies providing cost efficiencies that none of the 25 individual agencies would see if they developed their own systems. The costs emerge from a variety of component pieces, each of which is complex in its own right. One early portion of the project is site development and upgrades, environmental compliance, licensing and leases. The next component is the backbone of the system that includes the radio communication system, site equipment and dispatch consoles. The microwave radio system that connects all of the sites is another portion of the system. Finally, we connect an estimated 3,000 mobile and portable radios that support the police officers, fire fighters and other employees that function on the system and provide the services we can all recognize.

**9. Why was this particular system chosen as the replacement system?**

After years of study and input from every major public safety agency in the county, the consensus was an overwhelming “Yes” to the current proposal. We also had an outside firm review a variety of options (AECOM Report, April 2010) and they identified this Next Gen plan as the best option. Their recommendations were further reviewed by MERA members. Those efforts resulted in the current proposal.

**10. How much will this cost?**

MERA has developed a replacement project estimated at \$40 million. Funding would come from a countywide parcel tax that if passed by voters would secure the necessary bond funds.

**11. Am I already paying a tax for MERA now, and will this be a new tax?**

Currently, there is no special “MERA tax.” The present system is funded by payments from member agencies, with different members paying different amounts according to their population and usage. MERA plans to ask voters to pay a \$29 per year

parcel tax to fund the bond for the Next Gen system. This will be a new tax, requiring a two-thirds vote for passage. In the current budget-tightening environment, it was not practical to ask MERA members (cities and towns) to somehow find more money they didn't have to pay for the replacement system. Members will continue to fund MERA system operations.

**12. What if I'm a senior on a fixed income and I can't afford another expense?**

Based on our current estimates, we anticipate the cost for a single-family residence to be approximately \$2.50 per month. We are also including a low-income exemption for seniors.

**13. Will the bond be used to pay for public pension costs?**

No. The funds generated by this measure can only be spent for capital purposes, such as construction, communication equipment and towers. Funds cannot be spent for operating purposes such as administration, salaries and pensions.

**14. Who will place the tax initiative on the ballot? How and when?**

We will be asking the Marin County Board of Supervisors to place this measure on the ballot for the November 2014 election. That request to the Supervisors would likely occur in July or August 2014.

**15. If this is a problem for 2018, why are we talking about this in 2014?**

The process to develop a replacement system is a lengthy one. The current effort to create a funding source will run throughout 2014. If passed, funds from the parcel tax will begin providing revenues in 2015. Once the funding has been secured, a detailed RFP will be developed that specifies the system and capabilities we require within our available resources. After providing potential vendors time to prepare and deliver their proposals, it will take additional time to vet their proposals and select a final vendor(s) leading to contract negotiations. After that, it will take additional time to develop the new tower sites and infrastructure before the system can be used. The timeline is actually fairly quick for a project of this size and complexity.

**16. How can I find out more about MERA?**

To find out more information about MERA, please visit MERA's website at [meraonline.org](http://meraonline.org)

**MERA**  
Marin Emergency  
Radio Authority