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Governor to veto radio upgrade plan

Legislation would let county impose telephone surcharge to pay for half the project.

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Gov. David Paterson said Tuesday he plans to veto a bill that would have helped Onondaga County pay for half of its \$34.7 million emergency radio network upgrade.

That \$17 million will now have to come from a different source - likely property taxes.

"As a community, we will find a way to provide this lifesaving technology, but this veto makes that more difficult, and Gov. Paterson's veto squarely places this expense on the backs of local property taxpayers," County Executive Joanie Mahoney said.

The bill would have allowed the county to impose a 65-cent monthly surcharge on landline telephones. Sponsored by Assemblyman Bill Magnarelli, it passed both houses of the state Legislature this year.

The telephone fees would have financed about half the bonds the county needs to create an interoperable radio system, which would allow first responders from different departments to communicate with one another. Currently, the county's 57 fire departments, 20 emergency management agencies and 20 police departments use radios that work on different frequencies.

"I'm not for taxes or surcharges either, but I thought this was so (beneficial) for the safety of the community that it was worth doing," said Magnarelli, D-Syracuse.

The money that would have come from the surcharge will now have to be raised through property taxes, either local or county, lawmakers said.

If Paterson had signed the surcharge bill, the owner of a house assessed at \$100,000 would have had to pay an extra \$6.98 a year in county property taxes, on average, through 2023 to pay for the project. That's in addition to telephone surcharges.

Without the surcharge, that tax burden will about double, assuming the county collects the money, not the towns and villages, said John Balloni, the county's Emergency Communications commissioner.

The surcharge would have spread part of the cost to residents and businesses that don't pay

property taxes, Balloni said.

Paterson spokesman Morgan Hook deflected blame from the governor.

"If the county decides to raise property taxes, that's a county decision," Hook said. "That's not a decision that the governor is making. I would think the governor would actually encourage them to find a different revenue stream . . . because property taxes are already too high."

Postponing the program is not an option, Balloni said.

For one thing, the equipment has been ordered and some already is arriving, Balloni said. It's replacing gear that in some cases is 30 years old or more.

For another, the Federal Communications Commission has assigned frequencies for the system, but the county's license for them will run out at the end of 2008 unless the county begins to use them, Balloni said.

"Every day that we don't have it, lives are in danger. That is an often-beaten drum by the public safety sector, but this is really true," Balloni said.

Paterson said in a statement that he will veto the bill because it treats Onondaga County differently than other counties and contains several technical problems. Hook could not elaborate.

"Nobody saw this coming," Balloni said.

News of the veto came on what had been a good day for the project, as the county Legislature's Public Safety Committee voted to accept \$3.9 million in state grants to go toward the system. The full Legislature is expected to vote on the grants in August.

Federal money also is paying for the radio project.

Magnarelli, who has been working on the project for a year and a half, said he will continue working.

"To be honest with you, I'm not really clear why" the governor plans to veto the bill, Magnarelli said. "If there are technical problems, we'll be able to work them out. If it's a philosophical problem as well, then I guess we'll have to go and change their minds.

"I'm positive on this thing," Magnarelli said. "I think eventually we'll be able to do it one way or another."

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