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Legislators tune in radio funding woes

After veto threat, Onondaga County must find millions to upgrade emergency network.

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Two days after Gov. David Paterson blew their plans out of the water, Onondaga County's executive and legislators struggled to figure out how to pay for upgrading the county's emergency radio network.

A county legislative committee spent part of its session Friday grilling Chief Fiscal Officer Joe Mareane and others about the suddenly muddled plans to equip local police, fire and medical responders with radios that would let them speak directly with colleagues from other areas.

"This was a bolt out of the blue," Mareane told the lawmakers, referring to Paterson's announcement Wednesday that he would veto a bill that would have let the county levy a 65-cent-a-month surcharge on landline telephone bills. The surcharge proceeds were expected to pay for about half the \$34.7 million cost of the project.

Part of the veto's shock was cushioned by four state and federal grants totaling \$3.8 million for the project.

But Mark Stanczyk, D-Syracuse, tersely summed up the impact of the grants. "We're a little short of \$34 million," he said.

The county still has not borrowed the money to pay for the radio system, but it has ordered \$32 million worth of equipment and received bills for \$9 million of it.

"I don't think we can get out of it at this point," said Jo-Anne Munroe, deputy commissioner of the county's Department of Emergency Communications.

Putting the shortfall on county property owners' tax bills is one option, Mareane said. The owners of the average \$125,000 home would see their bill rise another \$9 to \$10 a year as a result, he said.

Another option - billing the towns and villages for their share - was discussed as a fallback position in December in case the surcharge idea fell through, said Robert Warner, R-Van Buren, who had Legislature staff dig up those meeting minutes to reinforce his recollection.

With the county sharing more services with the towns and villages, a new sales tax distribution

formula that retains more of those funds for county use may be in order, Stanczyk said.

That drew fire from Bernard Kraft, R-Clay, who said the city already is receiving twice as much sales tax money per person as the suburbs. Finding a way for the county and local governments to split the radio cost would be best, Kraft said.

One other option remained, Mareane said - it still may be possible to persuade Paterson to change his mind. The governor's veto announcement said it was unfair to give Onondaga County a privilege not given to other counties and that the bill suffered from unspecified technical flaws. It may be possible to fix enough flaws to induce Paterson to sign an amended bill, Mareane said.

Panel to look at process

The questions of whether to impose term limits and set up a nonpartisan redistricting process will be studied by a new commission proposed by Legislature Chairman William Meyer.

Meyer, R-Cicero, said Friday he will appoint freshman Legislator Robert DeMore, R-Fabius, to chair the panel. He'll decide on the rest of the members in the next few days, he said.

DeMore, a lawyer and former Fabius supervisor, was elected to the Legislature in November.

Democrats in recent weeks have introduced proposals to lengthen their terms, limit the number of terms they and other top county officials can serve and reform the redistricting commission. All would require charter changes and some, voter approval.

Meyer said he thinks having a commission explore the ideas will keep the discussion more open than if the Legislature acted directly.

Ways and Means took no action Friday on a term-limit proposal and deferred redistricting bills to the DeMore Commission, as it rapidly was dubbed.

Legislator Bill Kinne, D-Syracuse, objected.

"I wanted them to vote on it," Kinne said. "That commission is just a way to stall, for the Republicans to get their ducks in a row to decide how they want to handle it."

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