



SERS manages a network used by more than 40 police and fire agencies. (Snohomish County Emergency Radio System)

County Council puts sales tax increase on ballot

The money would support replacing the emergency radio system used by first responders.

By Noah Haglund

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EVERETT — A proposed sales tax increase to fix what Snohomish County's first responders consider an urgent need is headed to voters this fall.

The County Council voted unanimously Wednesday to put the 0.1 percent tax hike on the Nov. 6 ballot.

If passed, it would add an extra 10 cents to a \$100 purchase.

“The people in our communities deserve this level of service and have a realistic expectation that when they call, we will come ...,” Mill Creek Police Chief Greg Elwin told the council before the vote. “A two-way radio system is the backbone of communications between officers, deputies and the 911 communications center.”

Elwin spoke in his capacity as president of the Snohomish County Sheriff and Police Chiefs Association. Fire chiefs also told the council that the Snohomish County Emergency Radio System, or SERS, is essential.

SERS manages a network used by more than 40 police and fire agencies. Cities and fire districts help cover the costs.

Installation of the current analog radio system was completed in 2003. It suffered its first significant outage in January and, as time goes on, risks of communication breakdowns are bound to rise, officials have said.

They hope to replace it with a digital system by 2022. That includes 5,000 new hand-held radios and adding a few radio towers to the 19 already in use. That’s expected to cost up to \$75 million.

SERS has been considering the replacement for the past six years, said Marysville Mayor Jon Nehring, who serves as its board president.

“We didn’t want to come to anybody, to County Council or to voters, with anything until we knew that we had milked every last ounce out of this system,” Nehring said.

The tax would remain in place to pay for operations, maintenance and future upgrades.

The timing is crucial, officials say, because Motorola plans to stop supporting the current equipment after 2020. Some parts already are out of production. The new system also would add capacity to handle population growth.

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