



Caleb Hutton / Herald file Snohomish County Sheriff Ty Trenary (left) made the case to upgrade an aging radio system for police and firefighters at a January press conference, during which Jon Nehring (right), mayor of Marysville and board president of the Snohomish County Emergency Radio System, announced a \$70 million plan for digital radios and radio towers in Snohomish County.

## ELECTION 2018

# County pushes measure to replace outdated radio system

Voters will be asked to raise the sales tax to pay for upgrading systems used by first responders.

By Noah Haglund

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EVERETT — Snohomish County leaders want to ask voters this fall to raise the sales tax to pay for replacing the radio system police officers and firefighters rely on all day, every day.

The current network has grown obsolete and suffered its first major breakdown in January.

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The ballot measure proposed for November would add 0.1 percent to purchases countywide. That's an extra 10 cents on a \$100 purchase.

Forgoing that expense could prove costly, county officials warn. Without the money for radio handsets, towers and other equipment, first responders might not be able to arrive when needed.

“When I call 911, I want that officer or that firefighter to be here ASAP and I want him or her to be effective in helping me,” said Brad Steiner, executive director of [Snohomish County Emergency Radio System](#), or SERS. “We need to replace the system before we experience a catastrophic outage that affects people on the street.”

SERS manages the system, which is used by more than 40 police and fire agencies.

Motorola has said it will stop supporting the current equipment after 2020. Some parts already are out of production.

The [County Council](#) plans to set a public hearing date about the ballot measure during its meeting at 9 a.m. Wednesday. The hearing, likely later this month, would be a key step toward placing the proposal on the Nov. 6 ballot.

If approved, the tax would take effect next April. It would bring in an estimated \$9.4 million in the first year and about \$16.7 million per year in 2020 and beyond, a county analysis states. Spending would be overseen by an advisory board led by the sheriff. The money would pay for operations and future upgrades.

There's a lot to replace: some 5,000 radios, for starters. The plan calls for two or three new radio towers, adding to the 19 standing now. The new system would add capacity to handle population growth.

Getting the new digital radios and supporting gear in place is expected to take five years and up to \$75 million. The SERS board has selected Motorola for the work.

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“I see it as the No. 1 public safety issue for the county,” said Susan Neely, an executive director in County Executive Dave Somers’ office. “Since public safety is often the No. 1 priority of county government, it is the No. 1 issue facing every resident of this county.”

This wouldn’t be the first time the issue has gone to the ballot box.

Voters in 1996 rejected a countywide communications levy that would have raised property tax. County leaders, absent that extra revenue, set up the organization that became SERS. They issued bonds in 2001 that are still being paid off. By 2003, the first phase of the analog 800 MHz radio system was complete. Cities and fire districts help cover the costs.

County leaders could have chosen to ask for more property tax this time around. Many homeowners, however, already are reeling from a huge property-tax jump this year, largely tied to education and transit.

Sixteen other Washington counties have levied a sales tax to pay for emergency radio systems.

That could be a tough ask in south Snohomish County, where sales-tax rates are the highest in Washington.

Lynnwood, Mill Creek and Mukilteo are tied for the state’s top rate at 10.4 cents on the dollar. Shoppers in Brier, Edmonds, Mountlake Terrace, Woodway and the Snohomish County part of Bothell pay almost as much — 10.3 cents on the dollar. People in some neighboring parts of unincorporated county pay the same amount — more than what people pay in Seattle or Tacoma.

Expect to hear public safety officials make the case over the next few months that emergency communications are too important to skimp on.

“We kind of feel like we’re running on borrowed time,” Sheriff Ty Trenary told the County Council on Tuesday. “Some of us have lived through this for the past couple of years and we just want to make sure we get it right.”

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