

LA-RICS public-safety LTE project in peril after LA City Council votes to stop construction

Urgent Communications By Donny Jackson

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Los Angeles City Council members yesterday unanimously voted to halt construction of Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications System (LA-RICS) public-safety [LTE](#) cell sites in the city—a move that could undermine the largest first-responder broadband project in the country, according to several sources.

With the 12-0 vote, the Los Angeles City Council ordered that “construction of the LTE system at city of Los Angeles fire stations and police stations not commence, or immediately cease, if started.” This represents the second major entity to halt LTE construction, after the Los Angeles County board of supervisors last week stopped construction at most of its fire stations and many other sites for a period of at least two weeks.

In addition, the city council ordered its representatives on the LA-RICS joint powers authority (JPA) board to attempt to convince the LA-RICS JPA to change its current rules, which require member jurisdictions to participate in both the public-safety LTE project and the [P25](#) public-safety LMR deployment being pursued by LA-RICS. According to the approved motion, the Los Angeles City Council wants the JPA to “bifurcate” the projects, so the city can remain in the LMR initiative but exit the LTE effort.

If the LA-RICS JPA does not agree to bifurcate the public-safety communications projects and it is apparent that the LTE project cannot be finished by the Sept. 30 deadline associated with federal grant funding, the city council instructed its JPA representatives to “work to terminate the LTE project.”

Today, the LA-RICS JPA will conduct a meeting, the focal point of which is expected to be the status of the LTE project.

In the approved motion made by Los Angeles City Councilman Mitch Englander, the city council expressed its concerns about the financial burden that the LTE project could place on the city.

“The LA-RICS JPA will have to bear the full costs of any required work not completed by [the deadline associated with federal grant funding],” according to the motion. “The city share of JPA costs could be up to 40%, depending on the participation of other jurisdictions.

“These cost uncertainties, coupled with continued withdrawals of other jurisdictions from the LA-RICS JPA, delays in construction, and concerns by end users at proposed LTE sites, make it necessary to immediately halt the construction of the LTE portion of the system.”

Despite the intent to halt construction on the public-safety LTE network, Englander did not close the door on the city eventually participating in the LA-RICS broadband system. For this to happen, officials for the [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) (NTIA) would have to extend the deadline for the \$154.6 million in Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grants that represent most of the funding for the project.

Whether such an extension is realistic is a source of disagreement.

Englander said he believes the extension scenario is possible.

“The message that we’ve gotten is that [federal-government officials] want to make sure that we have systems in place,” Englander said during the meeting, [which was webcast](#). “We’re all hopeful that they will extend some of those deadlines, and we’ll work on all of those issues.”

During an [IWCE](#) session two weeks ago, LA-RICS Executive Director Patrick Mallon said he believes there is “not a chance in hell” that federal officials would extend the deadline for the use of the federal grants.

Yesterday, multiple other sources also expressed doubt that the LA-RICS could be salvaged as currently proposed.

“Unfortunately, it looks like it is dead,” one source familiar with the situation said on the condition of anonymity.

Some sources cited the possibility that a different kind of a public-safety [LTE](#) deployment could be pursued in the Los Angeles area, given the region’s importance to the overall [FirstNet](#) mission. However, all sources agreed that any attempts to revamp the public-safety LTE initiative would face significant challenges on multiple levels, and none of the sources were willing to speculate on a workable scenario.

If the federal government grants extra time for the public-safety LTE project, LA-RICS and the city should get input from key stakeholders, including representatives of fire and police unions that have been outspoken in their criticism of the public-safety LTE initiative, Englander said. In addition, LA-RICS should revisit the technical design of the LTE project that was bid less than two years ago, he said.

“We haven’t even explored new technologies, whether those are microcells ... I’ve got a microcell at my home; without a tower, you can have your own cell site,” Englander said. “You can buy those off the shelf today.

“This [the current LA-RICS LTE design] is technology that was started 20 and 30 years ago, and they haven’t looked at new technologies, which—quite frankly—could not only be less intrusive from a health perspective, from a community perspective, from an impact perspective, but also from a cost perspective. None of those things have been explored. We’re asking simply that they explore those things, as well.”

[NTIA](#) awarded LA-RICS with BTOP funding for the public-safety LTE project in 2009, just a few months before the world’s first commercial LTE service was launched in Europe.

Recent struggles with Los Angeles County, the city of Los Angeles and other regional jurisdictions are just the latest challenges for the LA-RICS LTE project. In 2011, LA-RICS selected [Raytheon](#) to build both the 700 MHz broadband LTE network and 700 MHz narrowband LMR system, but that [bid result was vacated](#). Before the project could be rebid the following year,

[NTIA froze all public-safety BTOP initiatives](#)

in the wake of

[Congress passing the law that established FirstNet](#)

In the fall of 2013, [FirstNet negotiated a spectrum-lease agreement with LA-RICS](#), and [Motorola Solutions](#)

won the bid for the LTE system after also

[signing a contract to build the P25 LMR system for LA-RICS](#)

. Early last year,

[LA-RICS signed the contract with Motorola Solutions to build the public-safety LTE network](#)

before the BTOP grant deadline expires this fall.

Mallon has acknowledged that the LA-RICS deployment timetable for the public-safety LTE network is aggressive. In fact, Mallon has noted that the project is feasible only because LA-RICS was able to secure an exemption to the normally time-consuming state regulations under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), if all LTE cell sites could be build on government property.

However, when LA-RICS began installing the LTE cell towers near fire stations and police stations, union officials voiced concerns—opposition that also was expressed during yesterday’s Los Angeles City Council meeting. While [health issues associated with RF emissions have been the focus of public union concerns](#)

in recent weeks, the representatives yesterday also noted other issues associated with the public-safety LTE project.

“We have heard for years now about grant deadlines and the importance of not losing federal funds,” Frank Lima, president of the United Firefighters of Los Angeles City (UFLAC), said. “Unfortunately, we’ve heard very little about the health and safety of the LA-RICS or the environmental and community impacts. This can’t be just about finishing a project, so we can all get federal funds, [but] that’s what it has felt like all along.”

This sentiment was echoed by Dave Gillotte, president of the LA County Firefighters Local 1014.

“We do need an interoperable radio system, and we’re not suggesting that we don’t—we’re very supportive of this,” Gillotte said. “But this is a simple decision to support your motion to responsibly step back from something that has not been transparent to any of your constituents, by any measure, to assess not only the health and safety issues that—while debatable, are not debatable that they are there—and we’re using 20-year-old data to evaluate them. Do you think that’s fair for cell-phone technology right now?”

“Raise your hand, if you want a cell-phone antenna in your kid’s house or in your own home—a 21% property-value decrease and citizens waking up and finding it out with their morning coffee? That’s no way to do business ... with the residents we serve and pay taxes.”

Craig Lally, president of the Los Angeles Police Protective League—the local police union—said union officials were “shocked” to learn that the massive [LTE](#) project has been going on for years without being informed about it.

“The [Los Angeles police] department failed to inform the real stakeholders, who are the police officers who have to work in these stations,” Lally said. “They could have done it through roll-call training. They have a captive audience for 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and there was nothing done in roll call. They could have come to us over the last three years and say, ‘Help us sell this to the cops, because it is safe.’”

“I didn’t receive any information about this project until 2:00 in the afternoon yesterday. And I firmly believe that the only reason I got that document yesterday was because of this motion that is being brought before you today. There’s a huge credibility gap between the police department and these officers ... they have no credibility. They could have come to us, and they didn’t. They chose not to.

“I have no idea if this project is safe or not, but I do know that the real stakeholders—the police officers—definitely don’t want the department to make the decision for them alone”

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