**Cooperating on Emergency Communications Across State and County Lines**

*Philadelphia’s Road to Pension Recovery initiative was a 2020 GFOA Awards for Excellence Winner in the Solution to a Common Problem category.*

The communication infrastructure in Scott County, Iowa, and Rock Island County, Illinois—which are part of one metropolitan area that is separated by the Mississippi River— needed to upgrade their communications infrastructure because it didn’t meet modern federal interoperability standards. The communities’ systems weren’t capable of communicating with one another, within the overall area (known as the Quad Cities), or with other agencies across the state line. The infrastructure was also aging and obsolete, potentially jeopardizing the critical life-saving role of 911 and emergency communications throughout the region. So, these two communities came together to solve a problem that affected them both: aging emergency radio infrastructure.

Darren Hart, captain and operations commander of the Rock Island County Sheriff’s Office and Rock Island’s project manager, said the project came about because both counties wanted to address this critical issue as well as wanting to maintain the counties’ working relationship. “We wanted to know what it would look to build out a public safety communication network for first responders. And with the two counties already operating closely together, it was important that our collaboration continued,” Hart said. “For many years, Rock Island County has been an island of sorts, where we would have agencies from other jurisdictions drive right by our squad cars and never have an opportunity to communicate with them.”

It was a problem that the two counties came together to solve. David Farmer, director of budget and administrative services for Scott County and the lead financial professional on the project for Scott County, points out that although this concept had been talked about long before the past few years, it officially got underway in 2017. The counties formed a steering committee made up of interested individuals from both governments—including police chiefs, city managers, and county financial officials—to begin looking at the project and determining the needs of both counties. A consultant was also brought on to help assess current and future needs, what the counties needed to do replace the aging communication system, and what the bottom line for cost expenditures would be.

The joint project the steering committee came up with is the Quad-City P25 Radio Project. The initiative consists of an innovative digital emergency radio system that shares lines and frequencies and allows for first responder communication Scott and Rock Island County and throughout the Quad City area. There will be 12 total towers installed across the two counties, with 7 of 12 towers based in Scott County and the remaining five in Rock Island County.

Hart noted that this project is a unique collaboration between two counties, each in a different state. When it’s finished, “first responder activity can easily move across state line from one county into the other,” he added. The project is nearing its final months, and infrastructure installation is expected to be completed in 2021. As Hart explains, “it has been a great collaboration thus far. We are now at the exciting part.”

**Financing and Ownership**

The most innovative aspect of the project is how it has been, and will continue to be, funded across the two counties, along with the ownership of the infrastructure. Instead of the typical leasing model, the counties wanted to own the infrastructure themselves. While RACOM Technologies, the vendor of the new system, will run and operate it for the two counties, Scott County and Rock Island County will own the emergency communications system. This arrangement provides a number of benefits, including an ownership approach that is specifically tailored for the two counties that will provide long-term stability.

The major funding components of the project includes funding for the infrastructure itself—radio towers, transmitting equipment, switches and servers, and the software and computers located at local dispatch centers—as well as funding for new radios for first responders. Although the counties are working together to build the system, the costs are still separated out by county. Each county pays for the infrastructure within its borders, and the counties have opted for different funding mechanisms.

Since Scott County has seven of the 12 towers, it will cover approximately 60 percent of the total costs. To pay for the project, Scott County has issued bonds that they will be paying through fiscal 2028, and they have also issued debt for essential purpose bonds for the entire county. Funding across the county is based on property taxes. As Farmer explains, “we normally like to divvy up costs by residents, but in this case, a business or manufacturer may be calling 911 for support, not a resident.” Therefore, the main funding mechanism Scott County is employing is property taxes.

Rock Island County, which will cover approximately 40 percent of all costs, has not taken out bonds or levied a dollar amount for the infrastructure. Instead, the county is employing what Hart describes as a “pay-as-you-go” mechanism that is based on served population to determine the percentage of total price of what the project would be. This total cost is then broken down for each covered municipality, which will pay its share however it sees fit, primarily using general fund revenues. Rock Island County created a payment schedule for each municipality that was sorted into significant milestones, with municipalities are paying into a dedicated fund overseen by the county, “to build out this as we go,” as Hart explains.

**What’s Next**

“As for the future, we are still having to develop a maintenance policy and what that will look like, as well as future financing costs,” Farmer said. He also emphasized the importance of making sure community members feel that they are getting good value as the project advances. This means the two counties need to ask value-focused questions upfront so they can focus on that value when presenting future facets of the project to community stakeholders, to keep them onboard.

The Scott County, Iowa, and Rock Island County, Illinois, Joint 911 Radio Project is starting its next phase. In late June 2020, an Iowa-Illinois joint advisory group met to start discussions about policies and protocols that will govern the project when it’s up and running. As Hart said, “the working partnership between Scott and Rock Island County has been fantastic to this point. Everyone who is a part of it understands how critical it is that it gets finished.” The project is expected to be completed in June 2021.