

A Plan?

I've apologized to Isabella County commissioners for my tunnel vision.

During recent interviews with various Isabella County employees, I realized that the Isabella County fire service digital radio fiasco might not be totally due to incompetence. It now seems to have the characteristics of a long-term business plan. Please feel free to correct me if I'm wrong about any of the following:

The Isabella County Transportation Commission (ICTC) was the first public agency in Isabella County to go digital with their 2-way radio system. The bus drivers discovered lots of dead spots. Thousands of dollars were spent upgrading equipment to get the system working just with high-power truck radios.

Ignoring (or ignorant of) the ICTC digital radio issues, Isabella County officials decided to convert Isabella County Sheriff's Department (ICSD) radio system to a digital system. A digital VHF system was purchased and installed. It didn't last long because officers could not reliably communicate with dispatch or each other throughout Isabella County. Maybe they perceived the failure of the new system as a safety issue. Sound familiar?

Next, Isabella County officials decided that the Sheriff's Department communications should be handled by the state-wide 800 MHz digital system operated by the Michigan's Public Safety Communications System (MPSCS). Dozens of very expensive 800 MHz digital radios, both mobile and hand-held, were purchased and installed.

HERE'S THE REALLY ASTOUNDING THING. Disregarding the serious issues that were encountered with the ICTC and ICSD VHF digital systems, Isabella County officials were somehow able to be convinced that Isabella County fire service communications should be converted to digital. SURPRISE!! The digital system didn't work in all areas of the County.

Next, instead of just fixing the new digital VHF system (or going back to the analog system that actually worked well for a quarter-century), County officials asked fire departments to try the MPSCS 800 MHz digital system. Predictably, the tests of the portables and pagers went pretty well in most areas, not so well in others.

However, implementing the 800 MHz plan for the fire departments will cost OVER A MILLION DOLLARS, and that's not all. Fire departments will have to pay an activation fee of \$250 for each device that uses the MPSCS 800 MHz system. That's \$250 for every portable radio, every truck radio, every base station (and maybe every pager). If a radio gets damaged or lost, it will cost another \$250 to activate the replacement. One fire chief estimated \$240,000 to purchase radios & pagers for his department, alone. That doesn't include the thousands of dollars of activation fees (e.g., 12 mobile radios, 20 portable, hand-held radios = \$7,500 activation fees).

That whole sequence of events was probably just coincidental, right? But, if it was a plan... that's what I call a VERY crafty long-range business plan.

Can you guess what sort of business might profit from a sequence of events like I've described? The term "government cash cow" would fit a plan like that. It's the kind of thing we taxpayers love to read about.