



City of Norton

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Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Transportation
MARCS Radio Testimony
Robert Fowler, M.P.A. City of Norton, Ohio
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Chairman Greenspan, Ranking Minority Member Skindell and member of the committee:

I am Robert Fowler, the Administrative Officer for the City of Norton, in Summit and Wayne Counties, and a member of the Ohio Association of Public Safety Directors. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today, and provide you with some information on the Multi-Agency Radio Communication System (MARCS) radio system in the State of Ohio.

To quickly help familiarize you with our community, the City of Norton is a community of 12,085 residents, situated in Summit and Wayne Counties at the intersection of Interstate 76 and State Route 21, and bordering Medina and Stark Counties. We are approximately 20.49 square miles and a mixture of suburban neighborhoods, retail and rural living. The suburban developments have increased our overall density to approximately 589 persons/sq. mile.

I am her today asking for the subcommittee to restore the funding to the Multi-Agency Radio Communication System omitted from the 2019-2020 biannual budget. MARCS is a tool used by all first responders to protect and serve those living and visiting our great state. The Multi-Agency Radio Communication System is not used solely by Norton, but many agencies throughout the state of Ohio, including EMA and State Highway Patrol, to allow for effective inter-agency communication during disasters and emergencies.

MARCS OVERVIEW

The mission statement of Multi-Agency Radio Communication System states: MARCS is dedicated to providing Ohio's first responders and public safety providers with state-of-the-art wireless digital communications, and to promote interoperability, in order to save lives and maximize effectiveness in both normal operations and emergency situations.

The operation and maintenance of the MARCS system is essential to ensuring public safety and was more apparent after several emergencies in the 1990's. The MARCS system was authorized by the Ohio General Assembly in 2000 and provides interoperability and connectivity during disasters. The interoperability and connectivity ensure the safety of all Ohioans.

For a city like Norton, situated on the border of three counties, interoperability is essential to providing for the safety of the community and first responders. Our fire department has automatic aid with departments in jurisdictions in Wayne and Medina counties, and mutual aid with agencies in Stark, Wayne and Medina Counties. Until all agencies joined the MARCS, we had very limited interoperability during routine emergencies. MARCS affords our first responders the ability to communicate with the agencies in Wayne and Medina counties with one radio. This one radio eliminates the need to carry additional devices to communicate with the adjoining jurisdictions.

FUNDING

The MARCS requires a monthly user fee be paid for each radio on the system. The basic fee without additional talk groups would have been \$20 per radio per month without the offset provided by H.B. 49 in 2017. For a small city, Norton has approximately 104 radios for all departments including: police, fire, and service. Without the offset (based on 2018 MARCSSIP pricing), the city of Norton would have paid annually \$24,960 for this basic essential service. As communities have fewer resources, they will have difficulty paying the increased fee, resulting in less users and less interoperability and connectivity. The offset is an important component to keep the MARCS system operating with all jurisdictions, which will ensure the necessary interoperability and connectivity exist during the times of a disaster.

SUMMARY

MARCS has provided public safety agencies serving multiple counties an essential communication tool. This tool allows the adjacent agencies to use one radio during times of an emergency to coordinate response actions. Without this tool, the city of Norton would have difficulty communicating with agencies like Wadsworth Fire Department (Medina County) and Chippewa Township Fire Department (Wayne County) during routine emergencies. These two agencies provide automatic aid to Norton for structure fires and other emergency situations and communication during emergencies is a critical public safety issue for the residents and first responders.

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) was adopted by the state of Ohio. NIMS highlights the need for interoperability. Interoperability is not just a tool for ensuring the safety of the public during a disaster, but a tool to keep our first responders safe. Without interoperability, Norton will be required to revert back to relay communications through dispatch centers. This is not recommended nor is it a safe practice during emergencies, but there is not another alternative without MARCS. MARCS interoperability and connectivity does provide an extra layer of protection the residents and safety for the first responders of our great state.

Governor DeWine's budget proposal defunds the MARCS fee offset. Without the fee offset, many smaller and economically-distressed cities and villages would no longer be able to participate in MARCS. The resulting lack of connectivity and interoperability for local governments across the state would jeopardize the lives of citizens and first responders across Ohio. The Ohio Municipal League and Ohio Association of Public Safety Directors are requesting the restoration of the fee offset.

Thank you for your time this morning, I would be happy to address any questions form the committee.