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TUNE IN FOR VOTE RESULTS

JOSALEE THRIFT REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Middlebury Police Officer Ron Pruchnicki tests his portable radio to the police dispatcher from 1625 Straits Turnpike in Middlebury on Friday. His attempts at getting in touch with the dispatcher were unsuccessful, so he called on his cell phone.

Middlebury referendum holds fate of radio system

BY MATTHEW O'ROURKE
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

MIDDLEBURY — Ron Pruchnicki steps into the foyer outside of Chubba's restaurant on Straits Turnpike and raises a portable radio to his face. "Six to headquarters," he says into the radio.

No response. He tries again. "Headquarters this is six," he says.

No answer. "I step 15 feet inside the building and they can't hear me," Pruchnicki says. "This always happens." His complaint has become common among police and town officials using portable radios, who have argued the town needs to upgrade its low-band communications system to a higher and more reliable frequency. On Tuesday, voters will determine the fate of a proposed $2.4 million high-band radio communication system at a townwide referendum. The referendum comes after months of debate over the cost of the project — up to $2.7 million including bonding and legal fees — and years after police first began complaining about "dead spots" across town where they have had trouble communicating.

Pruchnicki, a 14-year member of the police department, said the system has always had some trouble, but in recent years problems have been amplified.

"No system is going to be perfect, but this is beyond frustration," he said during a patrol Friday. The replacement has become an emotional issue for police and dispatchers, who argue that without action, officers

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SYSTEM: High-band emergency radios sought

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and other emergency officials could find themselves in danger while on duty. They've complained that the current low-band system, first installed in 1973 and subsequently updated, has become less reliable and replacement parts have become harder to find. The cost of the system has been the most divisive issue, following the difference between the only two bids the town received for the project. In December, the finance board formed a subcommittee to study the differences in cost between the $2.4 million proposal from Motorola and a $1.2 million proposal from Marcus Communications.

Officials and the town's consultant, Peter Oliver, of Oliver Associates, have said Marcus' bid did not meet the town's specifications, because it was not a "95/95 system," which means the system would cover 95 percent of the town 95 percent of the time when relying on the portable radios officers wear on their hips. The Marcus proposal was closer to 90 percent, according to Oliver.

Board of Finance Chairman Michael McCormack voted against the total price for the proposal at the board's January meeting, but the measure passed.

McCormack said he had reservations about the cost of the project in a tough economy and felt officials could have done more to reduce the price.

"I just felt that difference in the request for proposals was too great," McCormack said. "I just didn't understand why we wouldn't pick up the phone and call the two vendors and say they need to sharpen the pencil. How much more would it cost for 95 percent coverage with Marcus? I don't understand why those phone calls weren't made. It seems to me we were looking out for the vendor more than the taxpayer."

In the week before Tuesday's vote, police and other advocates of the proposed system started a door-to-door and flyer campaign in an attempt to gain support for the project. Some of the town's police filed last week to form a political action committee, called Middlebury United for Public Safety, as a formal support group. Lt. Richard Wildman, chairman of the PAC, said members distributed information on the Motorola system and set up tables around town for residents with questions about the switch.

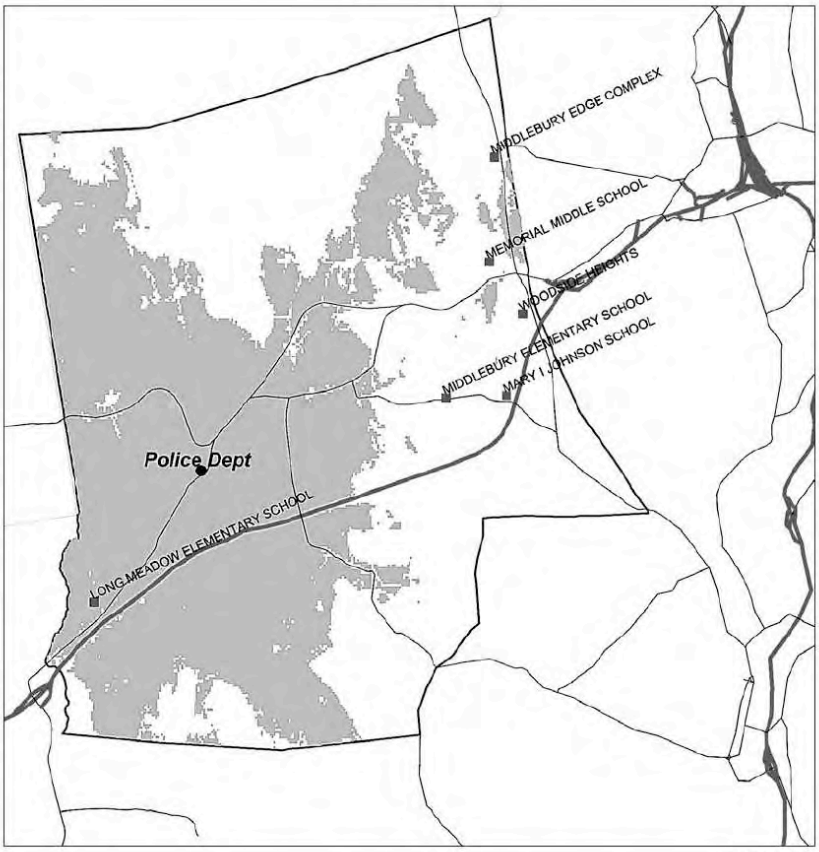
Police Chief Richard Guisti used his own money to purchase glossy flyers that were inserted into a recent edition of the Bee-Intelligencer weekly newspaper asking residents to "vote yes" on the new proposal.

"I think most people have heard that we need a new radio system but they haven't heard why," Guisti said. "This town has changed drastically in the past 20 years and we didn't have some of the buildings we have now, especially along Route 63."

Oliver said coverage is determined using a computer model that accounts for frequencies and the town's topography, among other factors, to determine where new antenna towers would need to be built. Based on officers' complaints, Oliver said, the portables work about half the time in half the town, and sometimes even less reliably indoors.

"It's designed as a worst-case scenario system," Oliver said of the proposal. "The map shows where the old system is most effective, most of the time. The coverage is not as reliable there and coverage in a building is probably a crapshoot."

Sometimes you're going to get reception, sometimes you aren't."



CONTRIBUTED

The shaded area of this map provided by Motorola shows current low-band emergency radio coverage with portable radios, according to Peter Oliver of Oliver Associates, the town's communications consultant. Using a $2.4 million high-band radio system, the purchase of which goes to a referendum Tuesday, the coverage would extend throughout town, Oliver said.

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LAST-MINUTE CAMPAIGNING

Police have formed a political action committee and have taken out advertisements in a local newspaper. Bruce Marcus, of Marcus Communications, began mailing a question and- answer sheet encouraging voters to vote against the proposal. Marcus' proposal was rejected by town officials, who say the proposal did not meet the project's specifications. "Vote no March 2 and save 10 percent on your taxes," the mailer reads. "Push for a better system at a lower cost." The police PAC's advertisement pushes for the system as a matter of public safety.

"Right now, you are not safe in the event of an emergency," the PAC's flier reads. "Don't take a 50/50 chance on your safety." Matt O'Connor, a spokesman for CSEA/SEIU Local 2001, a union that represents police in town, said the union plans to ask the State Elections Enforcement Commission Monday to investigate that mailer, which he called an "attempt to deceive" residents and may not have been sent properly through a political action committee.

"This an eleventh hour pitch coming out four days before the election which is just shameful," O'Connor said Saturday.

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