

Middlebury rejects radios

Voters nix proposed \$2.4M communications system

BY MATTHEW O'ROURKE

REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

MIDDLEBURY — Voters rejected a proposal to purchase a \$2.4 million high-band radio communications system at a townwide referendum Tuesday. An unofficial tally put the vote at 727-644 against the proposal.

The referendum came after more than four years of lobbying by police and other emergency workers to switch to a high-frequency system. Police complained that replacement parts for the current system are hard to find, and public safety officials complained of dead spots where they were unable to communicate.

Police Chief Richard Guisti said he was disappointed with Tuesday's results but stressed that the town needs to upgrade its radios.

"We're not going to give up," Guisti said. "This is just another bump in the road. I'm going to wait a few days to think it over, but I think we'll call together the Police Commission Monday to see where we can go. We have some more homework to do, but we're not going to give up on this."

Last year, officials questioned the bidding process after Bruce Marcus, of Manchesterbased Marcus Communications, complained to the Board of Finance that no one had contacted him about his proposal.

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Voting officials Anastasia Persico, left, and Elena Viega check Sue Matasavage's identification as she prepares to vote on the referendum for improvements the townwide radio communications systems at Shepardson Community Center in Middlebury on Tuesday.

VOTE: Police union to seek probe of telephone campaign

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Marcus was one of two bidders for the system. Officials accepted the bid from his competitor, Motorola, which was about twice as costly.

Marcus's company submitted a \$1.2 million bid for the radio system, but officials and the town's consultant, Peter Oliver, said the bid did not meet the town's specifications. Oliver said Marcus' proposal 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.

The current system works about half the time, covering half of the town.

Michael Cassidy said he voted against the proposal because he felt the costs were too high.

"I'm against it because it just sounds outrageous," Cassidy said. "It's too much."

Selectman Robert C. Desmarais, whose son is a police officer in town, said the town could potentially re-send the same plan to referendum again and hope the outcome will be different.

"It's not illegal to do that," Desmarais said.

Some residents received automated telephone calls over the weekend urging them to turn down the town's proposal, while others received fliers in the mail telling them they could save 10 percent on their taxes by voting against the proposal.

Representatives from CSEA/SEIU Local 2001, a union that represents police, have said they will ask the state Elections Enforcement Commission to investigate the last-minute campaigning.

Dawn Levesque, said she voted in favor of the proposal.

"You can't even get good cell phone reception in town, so they can't keep relying on that," Levesque said.

"They clearly need a new communications system for a safer community," she said.



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Sophia Farias, 4, curls her hair with her finger as she waits for her father, John , to vote on the referendum for improvements to townwide radio communications systems at Shepardson Community Center in Middlebury on Tuesday.

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Watertown cop supports radio upgrade

With the possibility of his town's own referendum for a communications system overhaul looming, at least one Watertown police officer lent support to colleagues in Middlebury Tuesday by showing up at the polls in a squad car.

Watertown Deputy Chief of Police R.J. Desena, who was covering for Chief John C. Gavallas Tuesday, said the head of Middlebury's police union, Al Cronin, asked officers from area towns show up at the polls to show support for Tuesday's referendum.

Watertown Officer Kevin Conard, president of the local police union, asked if officers could stop by, and was given the go-ahead, Desena said.

"They're not on town time," he said. "We're all for the referendum, not only to pass in (Watertown), but also in Middlebury."

He declined to comment on the use of the squad car.

— *Sam Cooper*