

**MARIN EMERGENCY RADIO AUTHORITY**


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**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** June 9, 2008

**TO:** Karin Hern, Grand Jury Committee Chair

**FROM:** Maureen Cassingham, Executive Officer 

**SUBJECT:** MERA BOARD OF DIRECTORS RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS – 2007-2008 MARIN COUNTY GRAND JURY “EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS AT MARIN SCHOOLS: A TALE OF CATASTROPHE” REPORT DATED MARCH 13, 2008

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On June 5, 2008, the Marin Emergency Radio Authority Board of Directors approved the attached response to the findings and recommendations in the above Grand Jury report at a publicly noticed meeting. Please contact me should you have questions.

Attachments

## GRAND JURY FINDINGS

- F1: MERA began as a communications system for first responders for use in emergencies.

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority, per its joint powers agreement, was formed “to plan, finance, implement, manage, own, and operate a multi-jurisdictional, county-wide public-safety, public-services, and emergency radio system” for use by its member agencies including law enforcement, fire management, emergency medical, public works maintenance, transit, local government, and other public service agencies in Marin County.

- F2: MERA has evolved into a general network embracing most of Marin’s public service and public safety day-to-day communications. Emergencies are one segment of its function.

The MERA system continues to function, per its original purpose, as “a multi-jurisdictional, county-wide public safety, public service and emergency radio system” for use by its member agencies.

- F3: No public or private school in Marin is part of MERA.

In 1999, MERA offered the Marin County Office of Education, on behalf of all schools in their jurisdiction, an opportunity to participate as a mutual aid agency and a waiver of their share of system construction (estimated 1999 dollar value – \$60,000) provided they purchase their own radios and participate in extensive radio training as did all MERA members. To date, this offer has not been accepted.

- F4: Marin County is a likely candidate for a major disaster at any time.

All counties in the State of California, including Marin County, are candidates for a major disaster at any time.

- F5: The present public-school emergency radio communications system is about to go belly-up, leaving the schools with no emergency radio communications capabilities.

The present public-school emergency radio system is operational but aging and in need of replacement. Every communications system, whatever its condition, is susceptible to being compromised in a disaster.

- F7: Money for Homeland Security grants for MERA radios in the schools has not been made available because of questionable interpretations of Homeland Security guidelines by local authorities.

MERA is supportive of the County Office of Education’s efforts to seek external funding. MERA is unaware of any questionable interpretations of Homeland Security funding guidelines.

GRAND JURY FINDINGS (continued)

- F8: Money has been the stumbling block for MERA radios in the schools. The immediate need for an emergency radio communications system for Marin schools has been trumped by the lack of financing and what seems to be a widespread attitude that puts money before school safety.

Since 1999, MERA has offered to waive the County Office of Education's share of system construction/expense (estimated 1999 dollar value – \$60,000) to facilitate their participation in the system. This is a considerable ongoing financial commitment on the part of its member agencies in the interest of school safety. MERA has also provided technical assistance to aid Marin schools in evaluating other emergency communications options.

- F10: There is a belief that installing MERA radios now could instill a false sense of security in the schools, because in any major crisis, the MERA system would be overwhelmed, with any immediate help unlikely in spite of MERA.

As a matter of best practices, reliance on any one communications system in a crisis is unwise. Alternative systems should be identified and utilized as fallback in the event of primary system failure. MERA, like any other communications system, can be overloaded, which is why other communications options will be utilized as backup.

- F11: An alternate plan to equip the schools with an emergency radio communications system that could be outside the MERA radio network is in an early state of consideration.

MERA's Communications Engineer has provided communications alternatives to the Marin County Office of Education and is awaiting the schools' input on their operating requirements to provide additional technical assistance.

## GRAND JURY RECOMMENDATIONS

**R1:** The Board of Supervisors, the Marin Emergency Radio Authority, the Disaster Council, the Marin County Office of Education, the Marin County Office of Emergency Services, the Marin County Department of Public Works, the Marin County Administrator's Office, the Marin County Department of Health & Human Services, the various public-school districts, and the private schools should immediately work together to fund and install the MERA system and its radios in all of Marin's public and private schools.

MERA continues to be proactive in facilitating Marin schools' emergency communications by offering to fund their share of MERA system construction costs and by providing technical assistance in evaluating other communications alternatives. MERA will work cooperatively with other agencies in the County to help identify resources to fund the cost of radios, should the Office of Education opt to use the MERA system.

**R2:** In the event it is determined that MERA is not a feasible option for Marin's schools, an effective, alternative emergency radio communication network, independent of MERA, should be immediately modeled, funded, and installed in Marin's public and private schools through the collective efforts of the entities identified in Recommendation R1.

MERA is currently providing technical assistance to the Marin County Office of Education on alternative communications systems. MERA will work cooperatively with other agencies in the County to assist the County Office of Education in identifying funding sources to implement an alternative to the MERA system, if it is determined to be more feasible.