

LOCAL

Ventura County is building a \$32M radio system. Here's why



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Key Points

- Plans call for building a \$32 million regional radio system.
- Most local jurisdictions signed up for the new system, but Simi Valley has yet to make a decision.

Radio towers that hopscotch mountain tops throughout Ventura County could soon link local law enforcement on a single communication system.

Plans call for **building a \$32 million** network, one that would replace aging radio equipment at 16 sites countywide. Instead of each jurisdiction rebuilding its own, the regional system could save millions of dollars, officials said. It also **could expand coverage** and allow law enforcement **to better communicate**, including on large-scale incidents or disasters.

That is, if departments participate.

Most signed up over the past couple of years, said Jim Norris, the project manager in the county's information technology services department. Simi Valley, however, has not yet decided whether to join or go it alone.

The move would allow officers and deputies from different jurisdictions to easily radio one another from anywhere in the county, said Patrick Maynard, director of the Ventura County Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services.

Now, different agencies use varying systems. Some can link up, but others cannot. When departments can't radio each other, messages get relayed through multiple people.

The more people in the chain, the greater the chance for delays or that something important gets missed, experts say. A breakdown in communication often is cited in reviews of major incidents, from the 9/11 attacks to the Borderline mass shooting in Thousand Oaks.

“In critical emergencies, communication is usually one of our biggest hurdles,” said Cmdr. Tim Ferrill, of the Ventura Police Department.

Why are local agencies replacing radio towers?

Like other local jurisdictions, the Ventura County Sheriff's Office has long had its own radio system.

Most last an average of 15 years and agencies countywide were approaching those limits, Maynard said. For the sheriff's office, replacing its existing VHF equipment was a possibility, but there was a space issue.

"There's just not a lot of availability of frequencies in this area," Maynard said.

Several local agencies used an analog VHF band, including the sheriff's office, but a digital radio system would allow more channels without spilling over into existing ones. It would allow room to grow.

Plus, one was already being built.

The Federal Communications Commission had carved out blocks of [700 megahertz frequencies](#) for public safety agencies years earlier. The list included the county, but at the time, most agencies and cities were not looking to make a switch.

The county's information technology services slowly started to build the new system anyway, one tower at a time, before any jurisdictions signed on. If they hadn't done so, the county risked losing its allotment, Norris said.

Who will pay for the \$32M radio system?

Early on, the sheriff's office considered a proposal for the 16-site system, but didn't move forward because of the cost. But as the agency's existing equipment crept closer to becoming defunct, officials asked for a new proposal, one redesigned to lower the cost.

This time, the price came in at \$32 million. That was still expensive, Maynard said, but if other jurisdictions shared the equipment, it could lower all of their costs.

Plans called for the cost to be scaled for what each jurisdiction typically would use. The sheriff's office, which needs countywide coverage and uses all 16 sites, would pay a much higher amount.

But a jurisdiction that needed less coverage would pay a smaller fraction and potentially save a multi-million price tag to build its own system.

The Ventura Police Department needed to change because of its aging system, in place for roughly 20 years, Ferrill said. Reliability had become an issue, towers would go offline and replacement parts were difficult to find, he said.

The regional system offered better communication and was expected to cost \$2.1 million less than if the city rebuilt on its own, he said. The department is currently upgrading its radios and expects to start using the new system by early 2026.

The sheriff's office was the first to sign on. As of early September, Ventura, Oxnard, Port Hueneme and Santa Paula – cities with their own police departments – had agreed to join the regional system, Norris said.

Other local cities, except for Simi Valley, contract with the sheriff's office that also provides law enforcement for unincorporated communities.

Will Simi Valley build its own radio system?

Police at CSU Channel Islands campus, community colleges, the Ventura County Transportation Commission and two large water districts also signed up.

In Simi Valley, officials said they are looking at options. On the eastern edge of the county, the city invested in its own radio system years ago – one that used a similar band to neighboring agencies in Los Angeles.

Now, that radio system is nearing the end of its life, said Heather Sumagaysay, deputy city manager. Officials are considering factors from coverage to costs to decide whether the city will continue on its own or join the regional system, she said. City staff likely will make a recommendation soon.

A dozen of the 16 sites have already been built, Norris said. The remaining four are expected to come online within the next year.

Plans also call for replacing the now 15-year-old microwave technology, which allows signals to bounce between the sites. That work also was included in the \$32 million cost and is expected to start later this year.

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