

St. Albert first responders getting new digital radios

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St. Albert first responders will be getting new digital radios sooner rather than later thanks to a recent vote by city council.

Fire services, municipal enforcement, ambulances, utilities, transit and public works will now be transitioned onto the same radio system, known as the Alberta First Responder Radio Communications System (AFRRCS). Fire chief Ray Richards says the system will make first responders safer when they respond to emergencies.

The system is a province-wide first responder's network that the government launched around three or four years ago. Alberta Health Services (AHS) was the first to transition towards the new digital radio system and now other emergency services will be following suit.

“It will make the emergency response smooth and dependable,” Richards said. “It’s going to make it a lot less complicated and much quicker.”

Right now the different units within the city use different radio systems, which makes communication between the units challenging. Each branch of emergency response uses their own radio and they do not have direct access to other first responders.

When working with some of the mutual aid partners, such as Spruce Grove or Morinville, they need to have one of the partners' radios on hand to communicate with them. They will plug the new radio into the local system and need to be bridged or patched into their system to communicate.

Richards said that sometimes valuable members of the team will have to stay behind to use the different radios to communicate with other units, rather than be attending to the situation.

The fire station currently has no direct connection with the local RCMP or AHS through their radio system. The local ambulances are dispatched from a centralized location in Edmonton, but one of the ambulances will carry a fire radio with them to check in with the other first responders. They also need to use cell phones in some instances to check in if there are problems with the radios.

The biggest problem with having all of the local first responders on different radio units is that it takes more time to communicate with each other.

“It adds another layer of communication and in our business time is everything,” Richards said. “Another factor is the human factor. Every time you hand off the information of a critical nature you run the risk of misinformation.”

Richards said that when you have the RCMP, ambulance, fire and mutual aid units on scene you create many different layers of communication and “you are looking for trouble.”

Richards said transition to the new system is needed for safety reasons. The current analogue radios would sometimes fail and create communication problems.

Digital radio systems have a life expectancy between 10 and 15 years. The province will maintain the infrastructure for the radios, which cuts the costs for the radios in the long term significantly.

The program became available on July 1, 2016. Edmonton, Spruce Grove, Strathcona and St. Albert are all moving towards these radios. Richards says he is not sure when the radios will arrive in St. Albert.