

Pennsylvania State Police Testimony
Senate Committees on Transportation, Communications & Technology,
Law & Justice, and Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness
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Presented by:
Colonel Frank Noonan
Commissioner, Pennsylvania State Police

Good morning members of the Senate Committees on Transportation, Communications & Technology, Law & Justice, and Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness. I am Colonel Frank Noonan, Commissioner of the Pennsylvania State Police. With me today is Lieutenant Colonel Scott Snyder, Deputy Commissioner of Staff, and Major John Dougherty, Director, Bureau of Communications and Information Services. On behalf of the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP), thank you for the opportunity to talk about the 800 MHz Statewide Radio Network commonly referred to as “PA-STARNet” and its future direction.

The PSP is responsible for patrolling 83 percent of Pennsylvania’s land mass and 62 percent of Pennsylvania’s highways (including all the interstates). PSP also provides full- or part-time police protection to more than 60 percent of Pennsylvania’s municipalities, representing 27 percent of the population. Troopers providing this service to the Commonwealth rely on land mobile radios as the “lifeline” and only effective means of communication between dispatchers and Troopers. Without a reliable radio, Troopers cannot summon help in an emergency. Without a reliable radio, Troopers cannot be dispatched to calls for service. The goal of any land

mobile radio system for law enforcement is to provide reliable and effective communications 99.9 percent of the time.

Currently PSP utilizes the PA-STARNet, 800 MHz radio system, as its primary radio system for voice and data communications. Many improvements have been made to PA-STARNet, and the system provides for features never before available in a PSP radio system such as encryption, talk-groups, automatic vehicle locator, data transmission, etc. In many cases, PA-STARNet meets the needs of PSP; in many cases it does not, as it does not meet our goal of reliable and effective communication 99.9 percent of the time. Despite the improvements to PA-STARNet, PSP still deals with coverage issues, system outages, and other problems that are inherent with PA-STARNet. The PSP has worked jointly with the Office of Public Safety Radio Services (OPRS) to mitigate several of these issues; however, many PA-STARNet shortcomings remain.

Compounding the 800 MHz radio concerns is the narrow banding mandate set forth by the FCC. The PSP has mitigated many of the 800 MHz issues by relying on its legacy VHF radio system as a back-up system for use in non-coverage areas and during system outages. It also provides an additional layer of interoperability by allowing the monitoring of some local

police frequencies. The FCC narrow banding mandate will render our legacy VHF system unusable after December 31, 2012. The PSP has filed a waiver request with the FCC in the hope of extending that time limit. The PSP, working jointly with OPRS, has initiated a plan to construct a narrow band VHF system to serve as a backup to the 800 MHz system. Mobile and station radios are in the procurement process and a request for proposal has been issued for upgrades to existing infrastructure. By leveraging existing infrastructure, this back-up system will be cost effective, mitigate some 800 MHz issues, and provide a back-up system that will provide reliable and continuous communications. It will also add an additional layer of interoperability to PSP communications. Although PA-STARNet has provided many valuable interoperability options, the conversion to PA-STARNet has also resulted in PSP losing the ability to immediately monitor and communicate directly with many agencies. The use of a dual band radio will provide instant interoperability with other agencies. This VHF radio procurement serves as an important first step in the future direction for the PA-STARNet system by considering alternate and cost effective methods of providing radio coverage and redundancy.

As you may be aware, the responsibility and oversight for the PA-STARNet system is being transitioned to the PSP. This transition is

expected to be completed by the end of the fiscal year. We will ensure that this transition moves forward smoothly and efficiently. In the upcoming weeks, we will be incorporating OPRS employees into PSP, developing organizational structures, and evaluating assets and resources.

We intend to initiate a strategic planning process with the formation of a committee comprised of all Commonwealth agencies that are users of the PA-STARNet system. The committee would identify the functional requirements and future needs of each agency and examine the most cost effective options for future development of the radio system utilizing existing infrastructure assets. A strategic plan will be developed to identify the vision and strategy to achieve the goal of providing a reliable, robust, and cost effective radio solution for all user agencies and one that has potential for future expansion. The PSP is committed to ensure the radio system is public safety grade and one that fully satisfies the needs of the Trooper on patrol, as well as the needs of all Commonwealth agencies.

In conclusion, on behalf of all the men and women of the Pennsylvania State Police, thank you for your support and the opportunity to testify before your Committees. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.