

## Frequently Asked Questions

### ***Why has sales tax been recommended as a method of funding these projects?***

A three year ¼ cent City sales tax was unanimously recommended as the best option for funding these projects by a 13 member citizens committee that studied seven different options. All of the other options involved long-term financing that would have led to millions of dollars in interest expenses, whereas sales tax will generate revenue sufficient to allow these projects to be funded on a pay-as-you-go basis. In addition, sales tax spreads the cost of these projects over everyone who buys goods and services in Lincoln—including people who live outside the City, and visitors, who also use emergency services. Other options would rely on property tax as the funding source. Only 42% of Lincoln residents pay property tax, but would shoulder the entire cost of the public safety projects.

### ***Will the sales tax increase really go away after three years?***

The State Legislature authorized an increase in the local-option sales tax by vote of the people, but the law requires that the length of the increase be fixed, and that it be included in the ballot question. This sales tax cannot be extended beyond the period authorized by the voters, under the terms of the legislation.

### ***Why do we need a new public safety radio system?***

The existing system was first acquired in 1987. Like many other mid-1980s technology, it has simply become obsolete. Many of the components are no longer manufactured or available, technicians familiar with the technology are retiring, and all vendor support is ending in 2017. While the system was well-engineered and regularly maintained and upgraded, the underlying technology itself has simply come to the end of its lifecycle. Police officers and firefighters depend on this radio system for their critical communications with dispatchers and with one another. Lincoln police officers alone push the button on their microphones more than five million times annually.

### ***Why hasn't the City been saving the funds needed to replace the radio system?***

While it would certainly have been possible to budget funds annually over a period of years in order to accumulate enough money for a radio system, this is seldom how large capital outlay projects are financed, either in government or in the private sector. To make an analogy, few people save for years in order to pay cash for a home, or for that matter even a new car. Past radio systems have been funded with general obligation bonds, like other major municipal infrastructure. Even if the city had attempted to save up \$20.5 million to pay cash for a radio system, the tight budget since 2000 would have made it incredibly difficult to do so without major cuts to the services funded in the City's annual operating budgets.

### ***Why does there seem to be a lack of specifics about the radio system?***

Public safety radio systems for jurisdictions of our size are complex, and not easily described in a few sentences. Detailed information, however, is available in our consultant's full 81 page report, available

online at <http://is.gd/radiosystemstudy>. The consultant's report, however, is not a proposal from an actual radio system vendor. After the City releases a Request for Proposals, each prospective vendor will need to develop their own plan to meet the City's requirements. Different vendors are likely to have different approaches. Many of the specifics about exact system design and engineering and precise costs will have to await detailed proposals from the bidders.

***Why is the radio system so expensive?***

Public safety radio systems are engineered for reliability and redundancy. Towers and shelters are constructed to high standards, and sites include backup generators and power supplies. The radios carried by public safety staff and installed in police cars and fire apparatus are built to withstand the harsh use of law enforcement officers and fire and rescue personnel. The radio system directly impacts the safety of the public, as well as the safety and efficiency of our public safety professionals. Reliability, robustness, and resilience are necessary to assure that the radio system functions properly in critical circumstances. While a public safety radio system is certainly a major expense, to put it in perspective it will cost about the same as the replacement of the Harris Overpass a few years ago, and significantly less than a new elementary school.

***How long will a new radio system last?***

Radio systems need regular maintenance, software and hardware updates. A significant upgrade is likely to be needed about every 8-10 years, just like our current radio system. These costs are in our annual operating budget now, and we have done two significant upgrades during this system's 27 year life. Some components need to be replaced regularly, such as computers and software, and some will last for decades with proper care, such as towers and shelters. With ongoing maintenance and updates, the radio system lasts as long as the technology is supported by the manufacturer. Our current system, EDACS, was launched in 1987, and vendor support ends in 2017. With the increasing pace of technological change our next system's underlying technology may not last 30 years like the current system, but 20 would not be an unreasonable estimate.

***Can't the public safety agencies just use cellphones for communications?***

Ever dropped a cell phone, or got one all really wet? More importantly, cellular telephone systems are not engineered for the same level of reliability as a public safety radio system. Cell service is typically lost in events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or ice storms. In emergency circumstances, even if cell sites are not compromised, the capacity of these systems is often exceeded as thousands of customers attempt to use their cell phones at the same time. Cellular networks do not give priority to public safety users, who would compete with everyone else trying to place a call. Basically, when you most need to communicate on a cellular telephone network, it is least likely to actually work. Public safety radio systems are engineered to withstand the environments in which they are utilized. In addition, they are designed with redundancies to protect against a single point of failure, and to ensure public safety personnel do not lose communications in a disaster or during a critical event.

***Could our public safety agencies just use the State radio system?***

The Nebraska Statewide Radio System does not have sufficient capacity in Lincoln and Lancaster County to handle the load of nearly 2,500 additional radios that presently on the City of Lincoln system. Moreover, it operates in the VHF frequency band, optimized for outdoor mobile (vehicular) coverage in a rural setting. The City's system, on the other hand, operates in the 800 MHz band, which is superior for building penetration, and is optimized for indoor portable (hand-held) coverage in an urban setting. Nonetheless, we could build (at our own expense) infrastructure needed for coverage in Lincoln and Lancaster County, add that to the Statewide Radio System assets, and share some of the network components, particularly the switches and computers that control the system. This is an option that we are considering, and we expect to see one or more vendor propose such an arrangement in response to our Request for Proposals. At this point, we cannot say that joining the state system will be either the best or the least expensive solution.

***Will the other users pay their share?***

About one-third of the users of our radio system are not City of Lincoln agencies. Over the years, Lincoln invited State, County, and other users to operate radios on our system. We did so because it was advantageous for us to have nearby public safety agencies like the University of Nebraska Police Department, Lancaster County Sheriff, Capital Security Division of the State Patrol, and Airport Authority Police on the same network. Our police and fire personnel interact daily with these agencies. We also invited these users in order to spread the annual cost of operations across a larger user group. Each user pays an annual per-radio fee that offsets the total cost of operations. What these non-City users did not pay for was the central network and system itself. In a sense, as we had to build it anyway, revenue from non-City users was a good deal for Lincoln. With a new radio system, we will continue to charge an annual fee to non-City users, and we intend to recoup at least a portion of the system/network acquisition costs.

***Why are more fire stations needed?***

Lincoln last opened a new fire station in 1997, Station 14 in the Highlands neighborhood. Since that time, Lincoln has grown by over 22 square miles, and about 57,000 people. In both land area and population, this is about the same as adding the City of Manhattan, Kansas to Lincoln! As a result of this growth, more and more addresses inside the city limits are beyond four minutes travel time from any of the existing 14 fire stations, a national standard for urban fire and rescue services. Relocating existing personnel and apparatus to four new fire stations would spread out those resources to cover a larger geographic area.

***What is so important about four minutes travel time from a fire station?***

Four minutes travel time to life-threatening emergencies is a national standard for urban fire and rescue services, adopted by the National Fire Protection Association and widely used as the benchmark U.S. cities. It is important, because the amount of time from the onset of an emergency to the arrival by emergency equipment and personnel makes a big difference in the outcome. A few minutes delay in the event of a stroke, fire, traumatic injury, cardiac or respiratory arrest can literally be the difference between life and death.

***How far beyond the four minute travel time standard are houses and businesses in Lincoln?***

There were 9,957 addresses in Lincoln beyond four minutes from a fire station as of January 1, 2015, 11% of the total addresses in Lincoln. The number goes up a little bit every week, as new building permits are issued and as new construction occurs at the edge of the city. Of those, over 3,500 were more than five minutes from a fire station, and over 600 are more than six minutes from a fire station. This is changing quickly, though, as considerable development occurs in northeast, southeast, and south Lincoln in the areas that are furthest from existing fire stations. Even more future development in these areas is anticipated over the next 20 years in the City's Comprehensive Plan.

***What would happen to the two fire stations that would be closed?***

These facilities could be declared surplus, sold, and returned to the tax rolls. Alternatively, they could be repurposed for some other public use. For the first 100 years of Lincoln Fire & Rescue's history, we occasionally moved fire stations to new locations to deal with the expanding city. Five of these former fire station buildings survive today. Former fire stations have become such things as a community center, Greek house, consignment shop, restaurant, art center, appliance store, and a recreation center.

***Why don't we just add four more staffed fire stations, rather than moving two stations and relocating existing equipment and personnel to two other newly-constructed stations?***

By far the biggest cost of adding fire stations is staffing. It takes about 14 firefighters to staff a single apparatus at a fire station around the clock. The annual personnel costs would exceed a million dollars for each station. Unlike the construction cost, the payroll is an ongoing expense every year. As we dig out from the largest economic recession since the Great Depression, the City budget simply cannot take on this added expense at this time without massive cuts to other City services or large tax increases. Spreading out the existing resources is a means to balance the need to accommodate city growth with the financial realities of the municipal budget.

***What will the new fire stations look like?***

We hired an architectural firm to produce a design. The new stations will look pretty much like newer fire stations around the country: utilitarian buildings with the basic areas needed for daily operations. These don't vary much from city to city: a dormitory area, lockers and restrooms, an office, a day room and kitchen. The dominant feature of a fire station is the apparatus floor: the garage where the apparatus and equipment are kept. We hope to avoid two mistakes made on some of our older stations, insufficient apparatus space, and inadequate facilities to accommodate both male and female staff. One of the stations in Southeast Lincoln would be a joint police and fire facility, where about 50 police personnel would report for duty during the week. This would be significantly larger, with the same type of space found in Lincoln's other two police substations at 27<sup>th</sup> and Holdrege and 49<sup>th</sup> and Huntington. Police officers who work in southeast Lincoln presently deploy from downtown. Response times and coverage are problematic due to the long distance these officers must travel at shift change. Significant fuel savings and personnel savings would also be realized with a southeast police station. With a joint facility, architectural fees, land acquisition costs, and some of the basic construction costs will be lower

compared to separate police and fire stations. In addition, some of the interior spaces can be shared, lowering the total square footage needed in comparison to separate stations.

***Why do fire engines respond to medical emergencies, instead of just an ambulance?***

Ambulances carry two personnel. For most medical emergencies, more are needed for patient care. Consider someone experiencing chest pain, for example. First responders need to assess the patient, start an IV, administer drugs, connect an EKG, maintain an airway, communicate with the emergency room staff, monitor vital signs, and perform several other tasks. This really requires a team. Think of the size of the team that will attend this patient once he or she arrives at the hospital. In addition, just moving a patient often requires more than two personnel. Back injuries are the leading source of firefighter injuries in Lincoln, and patients are not getting smaller. The team arrives in two vehicles. The crew from the fire station is usually closer, because there are more fire apparatus than ambulances, and because the ambulances are more likely to be handling another call. All of our firefighters are emergency medical technicians, and many of our fire apparatus are also staffed with at least one paramedic. They also carry defibrillators and medical equipment. Thus, the fire crew is the quickest way to get a trained EMS provider at the patient's side. They travel on a fire engine or truck simply because that is the vehicle they have. We have been testing an alternate response vehicle lately, essentially a crew cab pickup loaded with supplies, and a smaller vehicle may be a growing trend for responses to most medical emergencies as an alternative to the fire apparatus.