



## **NO NEED FOR PIGEONS THANKS TO SOPHISTICATED NEW RADIO SYSTEM IN WHITFIELD COUNTY**

**By MITCH TALLEY**

*Whitfield County Director of  
Communications*

Claude Craig jokes that the antiquated communications system used by first responders in Whitfield County had nearly reached the point where it might soon have been better to just toss pigeons into the air with notes on their legs telling lawmen where they were needed.

There's no need for such drastic measures now, though, as Craig,

director of the county's Emergency Management Agency, reports that a new \$12 million state-of-the-art communications system, paid for with SPLOST funds, has been up and running since early August.

"We Band-Aided and repaired and fixed for 43 years on that system," said Craig, who ironically had just started at the sheriff's office when the old radios were installed, "and it finally got to the point where there were no more Band-Aids. It was just unacceptable and didn't work. You could be standing in a parking lot somewhere, and I could holler at you and hear you fine, but I couldn't talk to you on the radio."

Craig thanked local voters for approving a SPLOST in March 2015 to pay for the new system. Two and a half years of planning finally came to a close on Aug. 2-3 when workers in several city and county departments switched over to the new digital communications system. What a glorious day it was, Craig says.

"Great ... no problems ... best thing that ever happened ... works fine ... works great ... no dead spots," Craig said when asked for comments he had heard from some of the users of the new system.



Count Dalton Fire Chief Todd Pangle as a believer in the new system.

“There’s no comparison,” he told the Dalton Daily Citizen. “We can talk portable to portable better than we could talk mobile to mobile before. So far, we have found no dead spots for communications. Previously, we had multiple dead spots. Even in residential calls, we would find that guys inside were having trouble communicating with people outside.”

A total of 1,196 radios were installed and are being used by the Whitfield County Sheriff’s Office, Dalton Police Department, Whitfield County Fire Department, Dalton Fire Department, Whitfield County Public Works, Dalton Public Works, 911, EMA, Cohutta, Varnell and Tunnel Hill, District Attorney’s Office, and constables.

“This thing didn’t just happen, like, oh, we’re buying a new radio system, OK, open that box, there it is, OK, it’s our new radio system,” Craig said. “It just didn’t happen that way. There is thousands upon thousands of hours that have gone into this to make it work – from the infrastructure all the way down to training for the end user.”

And the work is not over.

“You’ve got to manage the system on a daily basis,” Craig said. “It’s not just out there running itself. We’ve got three tower sites we’ve got to maintain, got to keep power on them. Power goes out, you’ve got to have generators, got to make sure the generator runs. If the generator doesn’t run, you’ve got to make sure the UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) works. We’ve got to keep power on. You’ve also got to manage the users because everybody has a unique code in their radio.

You can't take my radio and just go do whatever with it – it's unique to each person. When you push that button, dispatch knows who's talking."

Managing the new system is easier, though, since the county joined the Tennessee Valley Radio Communications System (TVRCS), which includes 10 counties in Tennessee and Catoosa, Dade, and Walker counties in Georgia.

"The old system basically consisted of an antenna on a pole and a repeater," Craig said, noting that it just broadcast an analog signal out as far as it could to the people that were close enough to receive it. "Be it a telephone pole, a three-legged tower pole, whatever, it was just an antenna and a repeater, and that's what your system was. The repeater took what you said and repeated it so other users could hear you."

The new system is much more sophisticated and reliable. "Our new tower at the 911 Center is 'married' to the three other tower sites, locally, and then regionally to all the other sites going up to Tennessee and Catoosa, Dade and Walker," Craig said. "If one tower fails for any reason, the other three would be able to take over. The system would just say, hey, this site's down, so just use the other three to broadcast the signals. It might even use a tower over in another county if it's closer to the user."

Craig said the original \$26 million price tag to replace the old system would have required the county to build 11 tower sites, but by joining the TVRCS, they only had to build three new towers, cutting the cost of the project by more than half. "TVRCS already had a tower on Dug Gap Mountain in Whitfield County that was servicing another county," he explained, "so we were able to tie onto that one, too."

Jeff Ownby, deputy director at Whitfield EMA, pointed out that with the old system, each department basically managed its own equipment, which varied from agency to agency. Now everybody uses the same Motorola radios, which will be managed and updated by TVRCS in the coming years.

An advantage to being on the regional system is that Whitfield users can communicate with all the other agencies using it in Georgia and Tennessee, particularly useful during a regional emergency.

"We've always offered automatic aid to agencies around us," Ownby said, "but the county fire department just recently signed some agreements to help with both our county and Catoosa and Walker county ISO ratings. Both those counties are on this system. Before, it was a challenge talking to these counties because they were on an 800 megahertz system and we were not. Now we actually have shared fire channels. If we're responding in Catoosa County, for

example, we can talk on their fire channel or even one of their fire ground channels which is immediately issued if there's a working fire. They can do the same with us."

More importantly on a daily basis, though, the new system has eliminated virtually all the dead spots in Whitfield County that plagued the old system for years and left first responders sometimes unable to communicate with others.

"We've got great coverage now," Craig said. "I mean, there's no question. We checked over 3,000 grids when we were testing the system, and we had only one grid that failed. We went back, and it turned out to be a grid that you couldn't really drive into. So we did the test again on foot, and it was fine."

Whitfield County Sheriff's Office Lt. Gary Stephens says he was recently near the Tennessee state line and was able to talk clearly to dispatch.

"In the previous situation," he told the Daily Citizen, "I probably would have gone back to my car and used my phone, if I had phone service."

Stephens recounted a recent ATV accident in the Chattahoochee National Forest in the northwest section of the county.

"We all went to the first responders channel," he said. "As I was riding in, we could talk to the firefighters who were there, and in the past there would have been no radio service at all in that area."

The new system is also encrypted, which means that people with scanners at home can't hear what's going on.

"But it means more than that," Ownby said. "What it really means is that you can't just show up with a radio and start talking on our system. You can't just buy a radio from Motorola and show up in Whitfield County and say I'm gonna start using the radio system. That's just not the way it works. It has to be programmed to the specifications of the TVRCS system. That means our system is more secure against attacks from outside users."

Some two months into the system, Craig says the bottom line is that the new radios are "exceeding expectations."

"The coverage is so much better," he says. "Being able to hear is important in an emergency. You know, seconds count if you're having a heart attack. If we're dispatching an ambulance or a fire truck when you're having a heart attack, if they can't hear where we're telling them to go, that costs time.

"Now, it's..." Craig says, pausing to snap his fingers, "one time and go. The responders can actually hear the dispatchers give the addresses the first time whereas before it was a crap shoot. Sometimes you might hear it, sometimes you might not."

Chief Pangle calls the new system a “great investment,” and fellow Whitfield County Fire Chief Ed O’Brien said it’s “exceeding our expectations.”

“I know it cost a lot,” Pangle told the Daily Citizen, “but from my perspective, it was worth every penny, and I really thank the taxpayers and voters for allowing us to make that investment.”

Now there’s definitely no need for those pigeons anymore.