

# Ideas in Action

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## Improving Communications for Law Enforcement

Written by: Robert Stork, President & CEO, Communications International, Inc.

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Last year, Florida TaxWatch called for increased spending for public defenders and state attorneys to ensure justice is available for defendants and victims involved in Florida's court system. Properly funding the justice system is a smart use of taxpayer dollars and is critical to maintaining safety and justice. The legislature heeded TaxWatch's recommendation in the 2014 budget. This year, lawmakers should extend their commitment to funding the justice system to law enforcement by investing in the replacement of the state's law enforcement radio system.

This year, a debate has arisen about the best approach in making sure the thousands of officers who use the State Law Enforcement Radio System (SLERS) have the proper technology with which to communicate in life-or-death situations. This network has connected state agency officers from more than 20 agencies since 2000, including the Florida Highway Patrol, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Florida Department of Corrections, as well as more than three dozen local jurisdictions.

The Joint Task Force on State Agency Law Enforcement Communications, a board of officers representing state agencies with law enforcement divisions, has recommended replacing SLERS with a digital system called Project 25 (P25). P25 technology allows for better interoperability among agencies on various networks, replaces severely outdated equipment and provides for additional coverage for officers relying on their radios while on the road.

The question for Florida lawmakers is whether to consider improving the system this year or starting the bidding process now for a system currently under contract through 2021. A state-funded study found that if the state were to hire additional employees and work with a new vendor to build a new P25 system, it could cost at least \$980 million.

To outsource and bid a new system and install the towers, antennas, software and build new radios, the cost could be \$950 million. For both of these options, the replacement of 15 year old radios and necessary infrastructure wouldn't be available to law enforcement until at least July 1, 2021.

However, working with the current vendor, the state might be able to get a new replacement system and the needed radio upgrades for much less than a potential \$1 billion price tag the study suggests. But the state was prohibited from even considering this option in the study, which could prove to be a costly mistake for the state.

The study's funding mechanism for a new system after 2021 is based largely on user and radio fees to make up the high cost of a transition. The 22 state agencies would be required to spend roughly \$27 million more than they pay now and the 41 third-party users who have signed onto SLERS would go from paying roughly \$500,000 annually to nearly \$8 million, based on the current number of radios and users on the system. For example, the Florida Highway Patrol would need to pay an additional \$9.7M per year under the business case study; Corrections would need to find \$4.2M within their budget and Fish & Wildlife's annual budget would have to increase by \$5.9M per year under this scenario. Local governments that participate in SLERS would see their fees skyrocket with increases of 1500%. Those are large burdens for both types of users to endure and essentially becomes a tax on law enforcement.

If the current vendor is able to produce reliable technology and the results outlined in the study for far less and far sooner than what has been outlined, it is something Florida taxpayers should at least be allowed to explore. State leaders can show real vision by providing thousands of officer's new radios and an upgraded network now, rather than when it's too late.

*Robert "Bob" Stork, of Vero Beach, Florida, is founder and CEO of Communications International. He is an industry veteran with a degree in electrical sciences. Throughout his career, he has created designs and delivered essential emergency services that provide for federal, state and local governmental agencies throughout the U.S. and across the globe. Stork is active in numerous community, church and charitable organizations, and serves on the executive board of Florida TaxWatch.*



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