



# Scott County and Rock Island County

## *Quad-City P25 Radio Project*

BY JAMIE PORTER



### About Scott County and Rock Island County

Scott County, Iowa, is located on the border of eastern Iowa, and Rock Island County is on the border of western Illinois, in an area commonly known as the Quad Cities. The metropolitan area has a population of 316,000, comprising 917 square miles, separated by the Mississippi River.

The communication infrastructure in Scott County, Iowa, and Rock Island County, Illinois—which are part of one metropolitan area that is separated by the Mississippi River—needed upgrading because it didn’t meet modern federal interoperability standards. The communities’ systems weren’t capable of communicating with one another, within the overall area (known as the Quad Cities), or with other agencies across the state line. The infrastructure was also aging and obsolete, potentially jeopardizing the critical lifesaving role of 911 and emergency communications throughout the region. So, these two communities came together to solve a problem that affected them both: aging emergency radio infrastructure.

Darren Hart, captain and operations commander of the Rock Island County Sheriff’s Office and Rock Island’s project manager, said the project came about because both counties wanted to address this critical issue as well as maintain their working relationship. “We wanted to know what it would look like to build out a public safety communication network for first responders. And with the two counties already operating closely together, it was important that our collaboration continue,” Hart said. “For many years, Rock Island County has been an island of sorts, where we would have agencies from other jurisdictions drive right by our squad cars and never have an opportunity to communicate with them.”

It was a problem that the two counties tackled together. David Farmer, director of budget and administrative services for Scott County and the lead financial professional on the project for Scott County, points out that although this concept had been talked about for some time, it officially got underway in 2017. The counties formed a steering committee made up of interested individuals

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—DARREN HART, CAPTAIN AND OPERATIONS COMMANDER OF THE ROCK ISLAND COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

from both governments—including police chiefs, city managers, and county financial officials—to begin looking at the project and determining the needs of both counties. A consultant was also brought on to help assess current and future needs, what the counties needed to do to replace the aging communication system, and what the bottom line for cost expenditures would be.

The joint project the steering committee came up with is the Quad-City P25 Radio Project. The initiative consists of an innovative digital emergency radio system that shares lines and frequencies and allows for first responder communication in Scott and Rock Island counties and throughout the Quad City area. There will be 12 total towers installed across the two counties, with seven of 12 towers based in Scott County and the remaining five in Rock Island County.

Hart noted that this project is a unique collaboration between two counties, each in a different state. When it's finished, “first responder activity can easily move across state lines from one county into the other,” he added. The project is nearing its final months, and infrastructure installation is expected to be completed in 2021. As Hart explains, “it has been a great collaboration thus far. We are now at the exciting part.”

#### FINANCING AND OWNERSHIP

The most innovative aspect of the project is how it has been, and will continue to be, funded across the two counties, along with the ownership of the infrastructure. Instead of the typical leasing model, the counties wanted to own the infrastructure themselves. While RACOM Technologies, the vendor of the new system, will run and operate it for the two counties, Scott County and Rock Island County will own the emergency communications system. This arrangement provides a number of benefits, including an ownership approach that is specifically tailored for the two counties that will provide long-term stability.



Funding for the Quad-City P25 Radio Project is shared by Scott and Rock Island Counties, who will jointly own the infrastructure.

The major funding components of the project include funding for the infrastructure itself—radio towers, transmitting equipment, switches and servers, and the software and computers located at local dispatch centers—as well as funding for new radios for first responders. Although the counties are working together to build the system, the costs are still separated out by county. Each county pays for the infrastructure within its borders, and the counties have opted for different funding mechanisms.

Since Scott County has seven of the 12 towers, it will cover approximately 60 percent of the total costs. To pay for the project, Scott County has issued bonds that it will be paying through fiscal 2028, and it has also issued debt for essential purpose bonds for the entire county. Funding across the county is based on property taxes. As Farmer explains, “we normally like to divvy up costs by residents, but in this case, a business or manufacturer may be calling 911 for support, not a resident.” Therefore, the main funding mechanism Scott County is employing is property taxes.

Rock Island County, which will cover approximately 40 percent of all costs, has not taken out bonds or levied a dollar amount for the infrastructure. Instead, the county is employing what Hart describes as a “pay-as-you-go” mechanism that is based on served population to determine the percentage of total price of what the project would be. This total cost is then broken down for each covered municipality, which will pay its share however it sees fit primarily using general fund revenues. Rock Island County created a payment schedule for each municipality that was sorted into significant milestones, with municipalities paying into a dedicated fund overseen by the county, “to build out this as we go,” as Hart explains.





## THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Both counties have learned a number of important lessons throughout this process. Farmer and Hart both emphasize the importance of having legal counsel involved early on in the project. Since the project was structured with multiple intergovernmental agreements, each state and county needs to abide by its own laws and regulations, which is why having legal counsel early on is imperative. Otherwise, the legal counsel will be “playing catch up for years of discussion,” Hart said.

It is also necessary to have the “willingness to try new things and the vision to have a joint system that can work within multiple jurisdictions,” Farmer said. Hart added that “if someone looked at this project, they would initially say there’s just no way, but you need to be creative. This project is a model for creativity in the future for counties that may struggle by themselves to do an infrastructure project.” Similarly, both governments should have the determination to see the project through. “It’s critical not to take no for an answer and to continue to push along, especially for a project that can be very beneficial to both counties involved,” Hart said.

The final takeaway is how important it is to get elected official support for the project. As Hart explains, “Getting elected official support is huge. Without their support, the project would not happen.” Hart and others on his team put a lot of time and effort into getting everyone to sign onto the project, going to each municipality in the county and speaking to city councils to communicate the importance of the project. And these efforts to get support from elected officials have paid off with “100 percent support and buy-in” from officials,” Hart said, adding that municipalities have even offered up their land as locations for the towers. “We want to make sure the product at the end is

something we can all be proud of and that will support public safety and first responders.”

Although the project has been very successful, Farmer and Hart pointed out that there were challenges along the way, and they anticipate more in the future. Many of the issues arose from the complexity of negotiations, because the project involved two counties and two states with different sets of laws. Figuring out the funding models and mechanisms for allocating who is going to pay for what portions of a common infrastructure took some work. The process also took longer than anticipated, although the end product will be better because of that extra time spent.

## WHAT’S NEXT

“As for the future, we are still having to develop a maintenance policy and what that will look like, as well as future financing costs,” Farmer said. He also emphasized the importance of making sure community members feel that they are getting good value as the project advances. This means the two counties need to ask value-focused questions upfront, so they can focus on that value when presenting future facets of the project to community stakeholders to keep them onboard.

The Scott County, Iowa, and Rock Island County, Illinois, Joint 911 Radio Project is starting its next phase. In late June 2020, an Iowa-Illinois joint advisory group met to start discussions about policies and protocols that will govern the project when it’s up and running. As Hart said, “the working partnership between Scott and Rock Island County has been fantastic to this point. Everyone who is a part of it understands how critical it is that it gets finished.” The project is expected to be completed in June 2021. 📍

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