

Communication Towers Being Installed

Written by Debbie Gregory
Tuesday, July 29, 2014



On Monday afternoon, July 28, I met with 911 Director Steve Jones to watch one of the three new communications towers being installed on Ward Lane, which is off Hwy. 141, near Westside. The director and I talked for a while as he explained this part of the \$3,058,970 Disaster Recovery Grant Macon County received following the 2008 tornado.

“In the last few years the radios have gotten crowded and emergency departments are not getting as good of a signal as they use to,” said 911 Director Steve Jones. “The emergency services - law enforcement, fire & rescue, and ambulances - have lost coverage and are having a lot of interference with the radio systems.”

Jones said last year the FCC required everyone to do what is called narrow banding. “That cuts the modulation that they are providing in half and that even created another 10 to 15 percent loss in signals,” said Jones. “So with this disaster grant we got, we went to all the emergency departments and one of the biggest things everybody wanted was better communications.”

“Currently all of our communication antennas are scattered around on the water tanks and there is so many of them together on the tanks that we are having alot of interference issues. So what we are going to be doing is going to a new technology where we can combine those radio systems into one type of antenna system on three 280 foot towers located in RBS, Lafayette and this one at Westside and we will be able to cover the whole county.”

They started construction on the tower at Ward Lane Monday morning and it was stacked by the afternoon, with safety lighting put on it for aviation.

“The towers are costing about 1.3 million dollars and we are spending about 1.5 million altogether in communication upgrades,” said Jones, “so emergency personnel can talk from

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anywhere in the county without any problems.”

The next phase is the licensing process says Jones and that means getting all licenses transferred to the towers. “Then we will be putting new base radio repeaters systems in what they call a Simulcast Radio System. Right now we have receivers on each side of the county that can receive a signal but sometimes the law officers or EMS can’t hear back. So what we are doing now is putting a transmitter and receiver on each side of the county and in the middle, so it is called Simulcast.”

Jones says the radio system will be what is called a digital radio system in the future and that is what everybody is going to. “We will be working for a while with both the old and new systems until we get all the bugs out of it.”

“We hope to be operational by the first of the year and we will have to bid out the radio equipment,” he said. “The reason we haven’t done that yet, is we are waiting to see how much the final cost of the towers will be because you always have adjustments to make. The radio equipment and transmitters & receivers will go in the building on site at each tower that ties together. NCTC is tying that together for us with fiber optics, which will result in all three towers and our dispatch tied together.”

911 Director Jones says he is proud to be getting this new system in Macon County and he said it is something they had thought about for years. “We never thought of getting a grant.”

“When everything is completed it will provide much better communications between the emergency services,” concluded Jones.