

Prince George's County could face significant setbacks in replacing its outdated radio system if the federal Department of Homeland Security sticks with its plan to reduce the National Capital Region's grant money by 40 percent.

"The fact that Prince George's County is the only county in the region that has an outdated radio system is of incredible concern," said Vernon Herron, director of the county's Office of Homeland Security. "This decision is going to have a critical impact on Prince George's County and the entire region."

Herron could not pin down the exact amount of money that the county could lose, but he said Prince George's typically receives \$2.2 million from the federal government for homeland security, and cuts from that figure would be significant.

He said the funding is vital for the effort to upgrade the county's 35-year-old 200 MHz radio system to an 800 MHz network.

If Prince George's is the only county in the region without those capabilities, its first responders would not be able to communicate with their counterparts elsewhere in case of an emergency.

"We're the gap in the region," Herron said. "That's our No. 1 critical issue in Prince George's County."

The office has been evaluating the radio system for two years and hopes to have a contract for a new system signed in a few months. But the project, estimated to cost up to \$75 million, relies heavily on federal funding.

John Erzen, spokesman for County Executive Jack B. Johnson, said the county would replace the system with or without federal dollars, but that the effort could take longer if the cuts stand.

Erzen said county lobbyists are speaking with representatives on Capitol Hill about

reconsidering the funding plan. Area congressmen already have protested the decision.

“As our nation’s capital region, we bear a disproportionate burden in terms of homeland security costs and ensuring public safety needs,” U.S. Reps. Steny Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville, and Albert Wynn (D-Dist. 4) of Mitchellville and other legislators said in a June 1 letter to the Department of Homeland Security.

The congressmen said they were “dismayed and frustrated” by the plan to cut spending and asked the department to reconsider, claiming that the entire region has \$190 million in documented need.

The cuts would reduce the amount of funding to the capital region from \$77 million to \$46 million.

Herron said the county also uses federal dollars for training first responders and citizen volunteers and for purchasing protective uniforms for firefighters and police.

“Homeland security is a critical component of public safety here in Prince George’s County, and we take it seriously,” Herron said. “It would be an injustice to our citizens if we did not fight in order to get those monies put back.”