County governments provide 9-1-1 emergency number service across Maryland – a critically important service under multiple strains. Changing technologies, market forces, and citizen expectations are driving a Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG911) effort in Maryland and across the country to improve service and help save lives.

The goal of Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs), or 9-1-1 call centers, is to ensure that in an emergency, a citizen can dial 9-1-1 and receive help anytime, anywhere, and from any device. Unfortunately, while the existing 9-1-1 system has been a success story for more than 30 years, it has been stretched to its limit as technology advances.

Citizens in Maryland are expecting to use modern communication channels (wireless, text messaging, video) to access emergency services. NG911 replaces the current analog network with a digital network, allowing 9-1-1 infrastructure to keep pace with increasing demands on public safety communications systems.

As Maryland and its counties move toward implementing an NG911 network, one key issue that must be addressed is how to fill the void left by Verizon and its vast communication infrastructure. And, while the technology to implement NG911 is available now, there are many issues that local governments must work through, including uniform specifications, the process of transition, governance, and funding.

The transition to NG911 cannot be achieved without significant funding to upgrade our existing 9-1-1 equipment and communications systems, which are already under-funded through existing user fees. While the exact cost of Maryland’s transition is unknown, the Federal Communications Commission has estimated that it will cost $2.68 billion to implement NG911 nationally.

There are three funding sources for 9-1-1 in Maryland. The first funding source is the State “9-1-1 fee,” which is set at $0.25 per subscriber per month for wired and wireless service. The second is the county “additional charge” in an amount determined by each county, through local ordinance, up to a maximum of $0.75 per bill per month for wired and wireless service. Allcounties and Baltimore City have already passed local ordinances establishing the additional charge at $0.75.The third funding source is the surcharge fee added to the sales of prepaid wireless service ($0.60 per transaction), collected at the point of sale.

As more people abandon traditional landlines in favor of cell phones, revenue from the fees has been stagnant. And because the fees were not indexed for inflation, they've stayed the same while 9-1-1 expenses have increased. Accordingly, the county “additional charge” covers less than 50% of county PSAP operational costs, and in 2015 counties supplemented with approximately $55 million in general revenue.

County Budget Officers have expressed concerns that the local 9-1-1 surcharge will not be sufficient to pay for maintenance and use of the current system while simultaneously allowing PSAPs to invest in making the transition to NG911.

Next Generation 9-1-1 issues are of top concern for county governments. NG911 will enhance the current capabilities of today’s 9-1-1 networks, allowing compatibility with more types of communication, providing greater situational awareness to dispatchers and emergency responders, and establishing a level of resilience not previously possible.

Over the past few years, there have been several events, including natural disasters and system outages, that have hampered our ability to respond to emergency calls. In order to provide the highest level of public safety for our citizens, it is imperative that we determine Maryland’s next steps in implementing Next Generation 9-1-1.