

Riverside County putting GPS to work for public safety

By JOHN ASBURY
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Riverside County emergency crews will soon have a new tool to help them get to distress calls faster.

The Riverside County Sheriff and Fire departments are in the process of installing Global Positioning Systems in emergency vehicles, officials from each department said.

The mapping systems, approved by the Board of Supervisors in 2005, will allow deputies or emergency personnel to use touch-screen computers in their vehicles to see the exact location from which a call is coming and the most direct route there.

"We can add new homes to the system as we discover them," said Tracy Venegas, a sheriff's technician who is helping install the system. "This will help deputies find streets better. Deputies want to go out and do their jobs, not mess with (finding) the info."

Riverside County is spending \$2.5 million to install the mapping system in more than 700 sheriff's vehicles and in the department's communications dispatch center in Riverside, Venegas said.

The new mapping system was installed at the communications center last summer. About 10 cruisers fitted with the system are being tested by departments in Temecula, Hemet and Moreno Valley. The three cities contract with the Riverside County Sheriff's Department for police services.

The program is expected to be launched

countywide by the end of the year, Venegas said. Riverside County fire officials hope to have the system installed in all of their emergency vehicles by July, said Battalion Chief Robert Toups.



Tracy Venegas, a sheriff's technician, is helping to install the mapping system that is expected to assist Riverside County authorities. "We can add new homes to the system as we discover them," she says. "This will help deputies find streets better."

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The Fire Department is spending \$2 million on the system and is paying for it with county funds and Department of Homeland Security grants.

About 175 of the department's 200-plus vehicles have been fitted with the system, which will be installed at the Perris command center within the next 18 months, Toups said.

Response times vary across the county, but the new system should reduce them all by about a minute, Toups said. The new technology will allow fire personnel to coordinate resources on any large-scale fire, including an automated system to call for air attacks, Toups said.

"This is the most advanced system in California. It's the largest undertaking in the state with these capabilities," Toups said. "It's exciting that Riverside County is taking the steps to advance in public safety."

The new system allows deputies and firefighters to input an address, and it will in-

stantly draw the quickest route on the map. Dispatchers can relay specific calls, using a vehicle-locator system that determines an officer's proximity to an incident.

The vehicle-locator system works off a cellular modem in each vehicle and a wireless network. The maps are fitted with satellite images of the area to help officials avoid hazards, such as pools and dead ends.

Most sheriff's vehicles are currently outfitted with mobile data terminals, which simply relay text and an address to deputies being dispatched. The deputies are left thumbing through Thomas Guide maps.

Emergency personnel may have difficulty finding a newer home or area because Thomas Guides are updated only once a year. With the new mapping systems, dispatchers can feed updated maps to the computers as soon as they are available, Venegas said.



Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster said the tools are important to keep technology in pace with the booming development.

"When we were smaller, we didn't need computers to figure out

where to go, but as we get bigger, we need to know where our troops are," Buster said.

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