NEWS FLASH–Oshkosh, Wis., July 2004, tens of thousands of pilots discover that they don’t need a $15,000 full-color multifunction COMM/NAV/GPS to safely fly from Point A to Point B…Well, OK, so it’s not really a news flash. But when you flip through all the popular aviation magazines you’ll probably get the idea that if it doesn’t have a “Direct To” button, it has got to go.

Sure you’d love the latest unit that does everything short of make coffee, but how many of us “hundred dollar hamburger” hunters can justify buying a box that costs around half of what our airplane is worth? Not many. So, short of mortgaging the old homestead, what are your options for the day your trusty panel-mount radios decide to head west? Thankfully the list is pretty short. You can fix ’em, replace ’em or bite the bullet and upgrade the whole system. But, since we’re staying budget conscious, we’ll stick to the fixing and replacing options for this story.

Old avionics never die…

They just become harder to fix. “If an owner is still flying with older Narco avionics—anything built within the past 25 or so years, chances are we can fix it,” explained Marty Lockner, manager of engineering for Narco Avionics. “Our philosophy is, if we have the part or can get the parts we will continue to repair the units.”

Lockner said, in fact the real determining factor as to whether or not a box can be fixed is the availability of parts. “Some of our suppliers have stopped making some components. There just isn’t enough demand,” he added.

Dan Barks, director of marketing for Honeywell General Aviation (or Bendix/King, as most of us know them), agreed with Lockner’s assessment and said, “If you’re talking about our first generation Gold Crown units, we try to support them as best we can, but when you start talking boxes that are 30-plus-years-old, it’s very hard to get parts.

Our suppliers just don’t see the demand to continue to make the components.”

“It’s a problem we’re seeing more and more with the old Collins’ Microline and some of the Bendix RDR-series radar units,” explained Keith Lewis, avionics service manager for Stevens Aviation. “Very recently, some of the avionics we had been able to repair we cannot find replacement parts for.

“We have to approach each situation on a case-by-case basis,” he added. “We really don’t know from day-to-day when this will occur and what we can do about it. The customer just has to bring it in and we’ll see what we can do.”

Dr. Frankenstein, I presume…

But just because the parts aren’t available doesn’t mean it’s
the end of the line. “A lot of times
our guys get pretty creative in
finding parts for the older stuff,”
he continued. “We get equipment
traded in on new stuff and if it’s
in good shape, the shop will keep
it around to use when they need
to repair a similar box. It’s pretty
inconsistent, but it can help keep
an older box in play if the owner
doesn’t want to buy a newer
unit.”

“The idea of searching for
parts for out-of-production units
may just work out sometimes,”
explained Brad Miller, service
manager, Gulf Coast Avionics.
“But, realistically, I’d say it’s an
emergency step. There’s really
no way of knowing the real con-
dition of the cannibalized parts—
you may be putting a poor part in
to fix a bad part.

“If it’s a matter of money, the
customer has to consider the
time it may take the shop guy to
search out the part and that cost
will be added to the overall repair
cost,” he continued. “In my expe-
rience, since you have no idea
how long the repair may last, it’s
not worth the cost and effort in
the long run.”

Lewis also added that another
cost the owner has to consider is
the aircraft’s downtime. “It’s just
suitable replacement parts,” he
said. “Can the owner really afford
to keep it out of service for an
unknown amount of time? Or is it
better to put that money toward
newer boxes?”

Miller explained that with some
conscientious shopping, aircraft
owners can pick themselves up a
very good, reconditioned box for
little more than the final cost of
having a technician hunt down a
used component and using it to
fix their current radio. “If it were
my airplane, I wouldn’t spend
money getting an old radio fixed,”
he said. “Part of that comes from
the fact that I do this for a living
and I know the history and actual
cost of keeping this old equip-
ment running. The other point
is that if I’m flying the airplane
I want the best avionics I can
afford…”

Everything old is new again…

One option available to pilots
flying with recent-generation
Narco Avionics is the company’s
upgrade program. “We currently
offer upgrades to owners who
have a Mark 12D, COMM 810,
or 811,” Lockner said. “What we
do is bring these units up to the
capabilities of our “plus” models.”

As Lockner explained it,
the upgrade nets the owner
more memory channels, and
digital bearing on the VOR side.
“Basically it’s a situation where
we replace the main board,
microprocessor, display circuitry,
power supply, display, trim panel
and provide a new product war-
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Even if you’re not flying
Narco, buying refurbished radios
is a very cost-effective way to
move your avionics suite a few
floors closer to the penthouse.
But all the experts agree that
you have to be careful what
you buy or you could end up
with a three thousand dollar
paperweight. “Whether we take
it in trade or buy boxes from a
salvage company, we take the
time to open every unit and go
through it carefully,” Gulf Coast’s
Miller said. “Just because a
radio has a yellow-tag doesn’t
mean it’s in good condition, it
just means that it worked when
they took it out.”

While there may be some
very appealing deals on eBay,
you have to be very careful. Of
those shoppers interviewed,
many said it is much better to
deal with a reputable avionics
shop. “It may cost a little more,
but in the long run you won’t
be throwing good money after
bad,” one technician said. “Just
because something is cheap
doesn’t mean it’s a good deal.”

Even if the boxes are in rela-
tively good shape, take a minute
to think about the long-term
effect of buying older avionics. If
you are really planning on keep-
ing your airplane for a long time,
then it may be a better idea to
spend some more money now
and get truly step-up capabili-
ties. “I certainly wouldn’t want
a customer to buy something
that is on the verge of being
obsolete itself,” Stevens’ Lewis
cautioned. “That’s a situation we
run into now and then. Say the replacement unit lasts two more years, then you’re back in the same situation having to spend money for a repair or another unit."

Dealing for dollars…

So just what are some tips for budget-conscious avionics buyers? Narco’s Lockner suggested you start by talking to other owners at your airport. “Say an owner buys a factory new [avionics] stack, he may be replacing a perfectly good used radio that he’d be willing to sell you at an attractive price. I’d also suggest that you have it checked out by an experienced avionics shop before you install it, but if it were working well in the other guy’s airplane there’s no reason it won’t work in your airplane.”

Another option is to check with the larger avionics dealers in your area. They are very often the source of some great deals on ‘experienced’ avionics. Especially when the manufacturers are having some kind of promotional offer.

“When we introduced our color-display units, we had an upgrade program for the earlier KLN-89B IFR GPS units and took a lot of them in trade,” Barks said. “Those are perfectly good, functional IFR units that are available not because they are worn out but because their owners wanted to upgrade to the newest technology.

“That’s a great opportunity for a lot of owners to make a big upgrade in performance and capability at a much lower cost than they imagined possible,” he continued. “We took them in trade, refurbished them when needed and have put them right back out on the used market at a tremendous price point.”

Ground control to Major Tom…

One last thing to consider before you start spending money on having your radios repaired or replaced is the condition of the antennas and wiring. “We often trace ‘radio’ problems to these areas and if an owner or shop starts there they may save a lot of time and money,” Gulf Coast’s Miller suggested. “You can put the best new radio with a 30-year old antenna and still have problems. It may only be part of the problem, but it is still part of the problem.”

Whatever you’re livin’ and flyin’ with be it used, reconditioned, remanufactured or just gracefully aged, your decision to upgrade, repair or replace should start with your avionics expert. ■