

What Can I Still Hear Without a Digital Scanner?
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Every time radio communication technology advances, there are voices – especially on social media – that insist that nobody will be able to monitor anything any more and that scanners are obsolete. The industry and hobby media compound the problem by referring to all radio scanners as “police scanners”, giving the impression that monitoring law enforcement is the only expected use for a scanner.

On the contrary, as many who frequent this net are well aware, there are many services that use two-way radio other than the police.

Aside from that, every single radio user does not automatically or immediately move to the latest new radio tech. Some are still operating the way they did decades ago. (In fact, CTCSS - also known as PL and by various other trademarked names - was invented by Motorola way back in 1951.) This can be for cost reasons, but is also often due to operational safety. More on this shortly.

Contrary to some ranting online, everything is not trunked. Everything is not digital. All police are not encrypted.

So, here in the Capital District, what can we monitor that is still analog and in the clear? Quite a lot!

First, let me define what I mean by “Capital District”. This might not be official, but it covers what most of us can reasonably expect to hear. Albany, Columbia, Greene, Fulton, Montgomery, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Schenectady, Schoharie, Warren, and Washington Counties are all within range of at least some of us. As an aside, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, is also mainly unencrypted analog for most services.

Second, let's define “scanner bands”. The definition I use is 25 to 960 MHz as it is about the widest frequency coverage that any analog scanner can access.

Note that this will not be an exhaustive listing of analog frequencies. That would take more time than this net has available.

Let's start with law enforcement. The following police departments are still operating either exclusively on analog channels or on other technologies that are tied in to legacy analog equipment:

New York State Police, New York State Parks Police, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, New York State Department of Transportation, and New York State Thruway Authority.

All of the above-mentioned County Sheriff's Offices except for Schenectady.

Some local PD have legacy analog channels for short range communications.

Now on to the fire service. Fireground operations in the counties using countywide or regional digital trunked systems have almost entirely moved off the old analog channels, but practically all of them still dispatch calls on their analog frequencies. The major local exception is the City of Albany.

EMS is also mainly analog, with available talkgroups on those digital trunks. But ambulance to hospital communications are analog (except where services are using cellphones or smartphone apps for that purpose). The only big commercial ambulance company remaining in the Capital District is Mohawk, and their dispatch channels are analog.

(I suppose, if you think ambulnz is “major”, then I should mention that they are not analog.)

The Lifenet of New York helicopters, and in fact most aeromedical helicopters operating over New York, are using analog communications for dispatch and interoperability.

Many other government services are also analog, even if trunked. Troy Public Utility is still operating on an 800 MHz EDACS trunked site. The Albany International Airport is on LTR trunking. Several of the ramp operations channels are also analog, although there is increasing use of digital protocols there.

There are many other general categories that are mostly or fully analog:

Aviation (for safety reasons, aircraft still use AM).

Railroads (again for safety reasons, trains use regular FM because several different railroads can be operating on the same tracks. You might have heard of NXDN being the new rail mode, but the few lines that have adopted it are using it for internal yard and rail police communications. CP Rail has a NXDN repeater near the old Colonie Yard, but it almost never has any traffic on it.)

Maritime. The VHF marine channels are all analog, except for 4 that are designated for position data.

Businesses. The older trunked systems like LTR and EDACS are analog (with the exception of EDACS ProVoice, which is not used in the Capital District.) There are many analog conventional repeaters still in operation in the area, carrying all sorts of business traffic.

Military. Base operations tend to be digital, but there are a lot of mobile military assets housed in the Capital District that operate in analog modes. Most of the ones with which I am familiar are aircraft - C-130s and various helicopters. These aircraft use VHF aviation channels to communicate with Air Traffic Control. The various military units also have UHF AM channels for operations and training. We can also monitor the aerial refueling tracks over the Adirondacks and northern New England on UHF.

Finally, there are the personal communication services – amateur, CB, and GMRS.

As we know, amateur radio contains a host of modes and protocols. In our area, though, the overwhelming majority of voice traffic is analog. CB and GMRS are confined to analog modes by regulation (although one of the local GMRS repeaters has carried illegal DMR traffic).

If I've omitted your favorite analog target, please speak up!