

DISPATCH SERVICES FOR MANCHESTER BY THE SEA – A SUMMARY
(Compiled by Fire Chief Cleary, Police Chief Fitzgerald and Town Administrator
Federspiel) (Revised July 21, 2021)

INTRODUCTION:

Currently, MBTS provides dispatch services to both police and fire departments from our own “in-house” operations within the Police Station. A few years ago, we merged both fire and police dispatching operations within the Police Department (the Fire Department use to handle dispatch duties for a fire incident after the initial call came through the Police Department.)

The status quo has numerous deficiencies that need correcting. These deficiencies can be corrected either by bolstering our in-house operations or by joining the regional dispatch center that the state now operates in Middleton next to the county jail complex.

The deficiencies of Manchester’s dispatching operations include:

Staffing struggles: 1) weekend coverage often is a struggle to secure using reserves, part-time dispatchers or patrolman on OT; 2) we lack a second dedicated dispatcher for larger incident management.

Antiquated software: new computer aided dispatch software is needed for both Fire and Police.

Formal Training for Dispatchers: training, especially fire-incident training, needs to be increased.

Funding for long-term capital equipment replacement: dispatch consoles, portable radios, and vehicle radios need replacement on a regular cycle costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Current Dispatch Operations:

24/7 dispatch service to our Police and Fire/EMS operations is provided at the Town’s Police Station. The dispatch room was recently renovated with 2 modern dispatch consoles and a bullet proof reception window per accreditation standards that serves the Police Lobby. Three full-time dispatchers each work one of the day’s 8-hour shifts Monday through Friday. The six 8-hour weekend shifts are covered by part-time dispatchers, reserve officers or patrolmen working overtime. Recently, finding sufficient staff to cover all shifts has been challenging.

Detailed descriptions of the Town’s dispatch system are contained in studies that have been conducted over the past 6 years. These studies include an assessment of the Town joining the then Sheriff Department operated Regional Emergency Communications Center, joining Hamilton’s Dispatch Center, or joining Danvers’ Dispatch Center. At the conclusion of each study the Selectmen decided to stay with our in-house dispatch operations because the service was either 1) not operating satisfactory (RECC) or 2) cost savings were not sufficient to justify the switch.

In addition to providing dispatch service, our dispatchers handle walk-in traffic to the police station. Walk-in traffic is light. The average number of daily walk-ins for the past 4 years (prior to COVID) has been 1.4 a day. Most walk-ins occur during regular business hours with some evening times as well. It is very rare to have anyone coming to the station at night. In nearly 30 years there has been 1 case of someone rushing into the station with an emergency (fear of being followed in relation to a domestic dispute.)

Regional Dispatch Service:

The state has assumed operations of the regional dispatch center housed next to the county jail complex in Middleton. The Center provides dispatch service for a handful of communities, including Essex, Middleton, and Topsfield. The Center provides state of the art equipment to member communities and currently offers its services at no cost. (When the Sherriff's Office ran the center there was a cost based on a community's population.)

Moving to the regional center would be a change to our operations. We would no longer have our own dispatchers at our Police Station, who also serve as station receptionists. There are a range of options for handling this change. Some communities, like Essex, rely on a "safe lobby" set up where audio and video communications are available from the police station lobby directly to the dispatch center. Like Essex, our patrol officers are only minutes away from getting back to the station if needed. A lobby visitor can lock themselves in the lobby for safety. Other communities provide lobby coverage either through dedicated staff or by adding this duty to existing staff. If Manchester were to move to the regional center for dispatch services, we would implement some combination of the above to continue to service the occasional walk-ins to the station and possibly non-emergency calls.

Two Basic Options: Upgrade In-House or join the Regional Dispatch Center

We are at a crossroads – either we need to reinvest in our own system, both from a capital equipment perspective and from a staffing perspective, or we join the regional center now being run by the state. As with any choice, there are pros and cons to either option.

	IN-HOUSE	REGIONAL CENTER
Pros:	Local Control Personalized Resident Service 24/7 staffing of Lobby Strong Dispatcher/Staff relationships	Highly & Continually Trained Dispatchers Minimum 4 dispatchers 24/7 All equipment needs provided Turn-key, no Town direct supervision No cost Service and All equipment Provided
Cons:	Higher Operating and Capital Expenses Staffing and training challenges Lack extra staffing for large incidents	Advisory Board only, No direct local control Takes away reception function at Police Lobby Less personalized service for residents and staff

COST COMPARISON

	<u>IN-HOUSE</u>	<u>REGIONAL CENTER</u>
Operating:	\$391,612	\$0 (Current state offer for 10yrs)
New Yrly Software Exp:	15,000	\$0
Less Grants:	\$ 70,840	\$0
Net Town Expense:	\$335,772	\$0
Police Lobby Staffing:	Included above	\$95,000 to \$290,000 (various options)

Capital Needs:

CAD Dispatch	\$190,000	Safe Lobby	\$18,000
Future Updates	\$ 60,000 5-6 yrs out		
NET SAVINGS: Annual Operating:		\$ 45,000 - \$240,000	
Capital:		\$232,000	

(An alternative staffing arrangement for In-house dispatching could reduce costs slightly.)

Lobby staffing cost range depends on the level of staffing we backfill and the degree of relying on existing staff to provide coverage.**

Past debates have tended to have the Police Department advocating for keeping dispatch services in-house (provides lobby reception service; local control and familiarity with police officers and residents) while the Fire Department favors switching to a regional model. In part this is driven by the Fire Department's concern for having a second dedicated dispatcher for a large fire or other emergency incidents. The gold standard for EMS calls is for the dispatcher to stay with the caller until the ambulance has arrived on scene. To guarantee our in-house service could provide a dedicated dispatcher when such incidents occur would require a doubling of our current dispatch staffing. The Fire Department is also anxious to add more career firefighter given the precipitous decline in call firefighters and the savings realized from switching to the regional dispatch model could fund most of this new cost.

There is an emotional factor here as well. Many residents favor in-house dispatch for the sense of small-town familiarity that they feel it provides. For many, this factor alone outweighs any cost savings and improved service for fire and medical emergency incidents.

****Lobby Coverage Alternatives:**

- 1) 24/7 Coverage: Basically, instead of dispatchers, have receptionists. With a lower pay grade, we would be saving a net of about \$45,000 a year (actual difference is over \$100,000 but we would no longer have the 911 grant funds.) Cost of \$290,000 vs net cost of \$335,000
- 2) 2 Shifts Daily: With virtually no walk-in traffic during the midnight shift, we could eliminate a third of our costs. Cost of \$192,000
 - a. A variation here is to go to 1.5 shifts thus receptionist from 8AM-8PM instead of 8AM to Midnight. Cost of \$135,000
- 3) 1.5 shifts daily and reassigning day staff. Under this option we have a receptionist covering the lobby 12 hours a day (8AM-8PM) but for the day shift, reassign current staff and add a new 10 hour a week Fire Department Administrator. Cost of \$95,000
- 4) Virtual Lobby Monitoring: Create safe lobby with audio/video connection to the regional center (this is what Essex has done successfully.) \$0 operating costs