

DISPATCH OPERATIONS AND OPTIONS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

June 4, 2021

Revised July 21, 2021

(Compiled by Fire Chief Cleary, Police Chief Fitzgerald and Town Administrator Federspiel)

How are public safety calls currently dispatched? Both 911 emergency calls from cell phones or landlines for Police and Fire/EMS service and regular business calls for both public safety departments are handled by our dispatch operations housed within the Manchester Police Station. We have one dispatcher on duty 24/7. Off-hour requests for DPW services are also handled. The dispatcher also services anyone who walks into the Police station. We have 3 full-time civilian dispatchers who work one of the three, daily 8 hour shifts Monday-Friday. Part-time dispatchers, reserve officers, and regular patrol officers working overtime cover the six 8-hour weekend shifts. Rockport's Dispatch operations serve as our back-up should our operations go down. For large active fires, the District 5 Regional Fire Dispatch operations in Beverly takes over (3 alarm fires and larger). The dispatch operations are part of the Police Department budget and the operations are under the management of the Police Chief with input from the Fire Chief.

Why is the Town discussing changes to our dispatch operations? Our current operations have deficiencies that need correcting. We are struggling to fill the weekend shifts. We lack an immediate second dispatcher to handle a large incident while the other dispatcher responds to the regular stream of calls. Our dispatch software is antiquated and needs a major upgrade. Longer term, we will face other equipment upgrades as equipment ages and technology changes.

What are the options for improving our dispatch service? We have two basic options – invest more in our “in-house” operations or contract out the services to another entity. The most viable outside entity at this time is the North Shore Regional 911 Center (NSR911) in Middleton (formally run by the Essex County Sheriff's Office, now run by the State's 911 division.)

How do these two options compare?

	<u>Manchester</u>	<u>NSR911</u>
# Dispatchers on Duty	One	Four+ (including dedicated call takers, Fire dispatchers, Police dispatchers)
Computer Aided Dispatch	No	Yes
APCO and NFPA Standards	Most	Yes
Yearly Operating Costs:		
Staffing	\$391,612	\$ 0 (10 year contract)
Software Fees	15,000	\$ 0
Less Grants	(70,840)	\$ 0

Net Town Expense:	\$335,772	\$ 0
Police Lobby Staffing:	Included in above	\$95,000 to \$290,000*

Immediate Capital Needs:

CAD Dispatch Software	\$190,000	\$18,000 Safe Lobby
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Long Term Capital Needs (5-6 years):

Software/hardware	\$60,000	\$0 (state provided)
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* Depends if the lobby is staffed during the day by partial re-assignments and part time in the evenings and weekends, or staffed 24/7. Four options are summarized here:

- 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

What is the track-record/history of the regional dispatch center? (Information taken from the NSR911 2020 Annual Report) Discussions began back in 2005 to establish a regional dispatch center. 13 communities, including Manchester, out of an original interest list of 23, applied for a state grant to build a new center next to the County Jail in 2009. The new Essex Regional Emergency Communications Center (ERECC) ultimately had six communities join (Amesbury, Beverly, Essex, Middleton, Topsfield, and Wenham) when it opened in 2013 under the direction of the Essex County Sheriff's Department. Beverly bowed out before switching its dispatch operations over to the ERECC. While Amesbury voted to withdraw it has remained with the Center.

Throughout its infancy, member communities expressed concerns about the Center's operations, call taking, dispatch times, communications and miscommunications. The new center over-promised and underdelivered. Despite the missteps, there were notable achievements, including meeting the standards for certification of the Association of Public Safety Communication Officials (APCO) – the first in Massachusetts and the second one in all New England to receive the APCO P33 level of certification.

After an intensive review of operations, management, and finances- completed in 2018- some 125 recommendations were made for improving operations, including reorganizing under the State's 911 Department. This transition was completed in July of 2019. The State agreed to fully fund and operate the center. As of July 2020, staff at the Center became employees of the state, no longer Sheriff's

Department employees. Member communities express a much higher level of satisfaction of the Center's service given all the changes that have been made.

Why are only 5 of the 34 North Shore Communities using the NSR911 Center? Reasons vary. Certainly, the start-up struggles the center had when operating under the Sheriff's Office contributed to a hesitancy to join. The strong allegiance/preference for local control and having dispatchers develop familiarity with a town or city is another big factor although GPS capabilities makes this less of a concern for some. There is new interest among a few municipalities in the regional center now that the State's 911 Division is running the center.

What is Manchester's history with studying dispatch options? Manchester was part of the early discussions about setting up a possible regional dispatch center dating back to 2005 and was one of the 13 communities that signed onto the grant application to the state seeking funding for a new center that ultimately led to the creation of the ERECC in Middleton. A study of Fire operations done in 2009 recommended that the Fire Department would benefit from the services of a regional dispatch center. A study into the pros and cons of joining the ERECC was done for the Town in 2015. It recommended the Town stay with its inhouse operations because the new Center was struggling with too many start-up issues. A study in 2017 explored the option of joining forces with Danvers as part of their new Police headquarters, concluding that there would not be sufficient savings to justify moving. A 2019 study looking into shared service options with Essex recommended that the Town revisit the option of joining the now NSR911 Center considering the many changes that have taken place since the 2015 study and Essex's positive experience with the Center.

What is meant by a "dark station"? Currently, our dispatchers provide 24/7 coverage at our Police Station (where they are located) and serve as receptionists to anyone who comes to the station lobby. If we no longer have dispatchers and did not backfill their receptionist role, there would be times when someone would come to the lobby and there would be no one there to immediately greet them. Patrol officers and supervisors may be out of the station on a call or patrolling around town. In this case there would be no physical presence at the station, thus the phrase a "dark" (that is empty) station. Currently, we average less than 2 walk-in visitors to the police lobby each day with the vast majority taking place during business hours.

But the worry is if someone comes to the station looking for help, they should be able to find it. Other towns that do not have a person assigned to their police station 24/7 use a secure lobby area with direct audio/video contact with dispatch. This provides immediate audio assistance while a police officer who is out on patrol is summoned and arrives within minutes. Essex switched to this model a few years ago.

Other options to the "safe lobby" approach include having police officers keep an eye on the lobby while at the station doing paperwork as well as the Department's Executive Assistant. We could also hire full-time and part-time receptionists for varying levels of coverage. There are numerous models that are working for other communities that we could explore. Depending on how and the extent to which we provide lobby coverage, costs estimates range from \$95,000 to \$290,000 annually.

Our Fire Station is left unstaffed ("dark") when the crew is out on a call. An emergency call box is in the entrance area should someone come during such a time. Residents have not complained about this arrangement.

What is the annual volume of calls to our dispatch operations and how do they break out according to type of call? (Calendar year 2020 data)

EMS/Ambulance Calls 455
Fire calls 12
Fire Services 865 (alarm inspections, false alarms, other permitting activity)
Police Crimes 456
Animal Control 411
Vehicle Accidents 107
Walk-ins to Station 354
Informational Inquires Approx. 11,500 – a little more than one an hour (Police, Fire, DPW, general town information inquiries) (Most of the 865 Fire service calls are included in this total)

Won't response times be slower through the regional center? No. Both services take a call and, after taking down the pertinent information, immediately contact the Police Officer or Fire Fighter on-duty. Our antiquated software does not allow an easy compilation of response times to calls. The NSR911 Center has their statistics listed on their web site.

What are our Police Chief and Fire Chief recommending? Both Chiefs agree that our current dispatch operations need a boost. If we stay in-house, they agree that we need an upgraded dispatch software system (computer aided dispatch -CAD), that we need a larger pool of part-time dispatchers for filling vacant shifts, and that how large incidents are covered needs improved protocols. The Fire Chief feels that the NFPA (National Fire Prevention Association) recommended standard of always having two dispatchers on duty is needed to provide a dedicated dispatcher to the incident while the other dispatcher handles the regular flow of calls that of course do not stop just because there is a large incident underway. To provide this level of coverage in-house would require a doubling of our current staffing. Given the infrequency of this need and the ability to utilize mutual aid dispatch services, the Police Chief feels this doubling of staffing is not necessary.

The Fire Chief believes the Fire Department's needs are best met by joining the regional center. The Police Chief believes that we should stay with our in-house operations and make the equipment/software improvements. However, he does worry about the ability to staff weekends and weekday vacancies created by leave time. He feels a fourth full-time dispatcher and going to a "4 days on -2 days off" scheduling model similar to what police officers work would greatly help his staffing challenges.

Who makes this decision? As an operational matter, this decision falls under the duties of the Select Board. Of course, as community leaders, they are very mindful of the preferences of residents and try to balance community preferences with their fiduciary responsibilities. Voters ultimately approve budgets. The funding for the needed improvements to an in-house operation must be approved at Town Meeting.

Can we "try out" the regional service and revert to in-house service if we decide we do not like the regional service? No, probably not. We must forfeit our state license to operate a public safety

dispatch service when we go to the regional center and the state is not likely to grant us a new license. Thus, we need to be sure we are comfortable with the regional option if we want to switch over.

What other challenges do our Public Safety Operations face? Staffing levels are the biggest challenges facing both departments. The Fire Department has seen a precipitous drop in the number of call fire fighters and feels that we need to add three or four career firefighters to our ranks to respond to simultaneous calls, especially back-to-back ambulance calls. Police reform legislation that was recently passed may impact the ranks of our reserve officers who fill in for regular officers using leave time (vacation, sick days) to the point where we may have to hire a couple more full-time officers to ensure always having two officers on duty. The added annual expenses here could be in the \$500-600,000 range. If we always want 2 dispatchers on duty this would cost another \$400,000. Longer term we face the need for upgraded or new public safety facilities.

Is money the driving factor for a decision on dispatch? Many factors come into play when deciding about dispatch operations. If cost were the only factor, given the lower cost of the regional option, the decision would be easy. The type of service and the trust/comfort level people have with the different options looms large in how people respond to the two choices before us. Many residents have expressed a preference for keeping the service local, that is in-house. They like the idea of having dispatchers who develop relationships with them and staff and have a strong familiarity with the town. Others look at the dollars saved and what they feel is a more robust system provided by the regional center and conclude the regional option is the better choice.

Isn't there a Town Meeting article about keeping dispatch operations in-house? Yes, a citizen's petition article is on the Warrant for the Annual Town Meeting scheduled for June 21, 2021. This is a non-binding advisory vote. Both the Selectmen and the Finance Committee feel this vote is premature as the public discussions about the pros and cons are still taking place. Thus, they are recommending a no vote on the petition article or for it to be passed over at this time. A majority of voters expressed a desire to continue to explore options at the June ATM and thus voted down the petition article.