

Paul White – 03/30/2023

My name is Paul White, and I served as Chair of the Regional Dispatch Working Group that was created by the Legislature last year. I also currently serve as Chair of the Barre Town Selectboard and I was appointed to the Regional Dispatch Working Group by the VT League of Cities and Towns to represent municipalities. I volunteered to serve on this working group because I felt that due to my background, I might have something to contribute to this work, however I did not intend to be elected Chair!

My background is with the Vermont State Police where I worked for a total of 30 years; 24 years in a full-time capacity and an additional six years as a part-time auxiliary trooper. At the time of my retirement from my full-time position I held the rank of Captain, and I served as Troop Commander for the Troop “A” area. VSP has gone through some reorganizational changes since my retirement but at that time, as the “A” Troop Commander I was responsible for the field stations in Williston, St Albans, and Middlesex, as well as the State communications center in Williston. In fact, I was responsible for the Williston communications center when in 2015, under Commissioner Keith Flynn and Governor Peter Shumlin, the State closed its communications centers in Derby and Rutland and consolidated operations into the two remaining communications centers in Williston and what was then Rockingham.

The Regional Dispatch Working Group was created by the Legislature (in Section E.209.1 of Act 185, the FY23 Appropriations Bill) and was directed to report back to the General Assembly and the Governor on “the new regional dispatch model”, however, this “new regional model” was not identified for the working group.

Let me be the first to acknowledge that the working group did not accomplish everything that it was charged with and there is still much work to be done. Essentially the Legislature took five police officers, a firefighter and a paramedic, two selectboard members, and the State E911 director, and asked us to come together as a group of volunteers to find a solution in four months’ time to a problem that has existed for decades, without the benefit of any financial resources or professional subject matter experts to guide and assist us in our work. I don’t mean to dismiss the knowledge and abilities of any of the working group members;

each one is highly knowledgeable in their own professional field, but this working group as constituted, essentially a group of volunteers, was in my opinion not qualified to identify funding mechanisms or to chart the path toward a groundbreaking new regional dispatch model.

After watching other committees get bogged down in irrelevant discussions because of a lack of understanding of the subject matter, to avoid confusion and wasted time I would like to start by making sure that this committee has a good understanding of what dispatching is, and the difference between dispatching and 911 call-taking.

911 call-taking is just what it sounds like; when a 911 call is placed by someone in Vermont that call is answered by a call-taker at one of six (6) existing Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) located throughout the state. Two of those PSAPs are operated by the State and are located at Vermont State Police facilities in Williston and Westminster. One PSAP is operated by the Lamoille County Sheriff and is located in Hyde Park. The three remaining PSAPs are operated by the Shelburne, St Albans, and Hartford Police Departments. Each of these six PSAPs has a defined “catchment area” which is the geographic area of the state which they are primarily responsible for answering 911 calls from. However, if the primary PSAP is busy and there are no call-takers available to answer the 911 call, that call will automatically re-route to another PSAP somewhere within Vermont.

Regardless of which PSAP receives any given 911 call, the call-taker will determine the nature and location of the emergency and then pass the call through to the appropriate dispatch center. Dispatchers are the people that receive these calls from the PSAP, and they may also receive calls directly from the public if a caller bypasses 911 and calls in the traditional way (i.e., by dialing a 7- or 10-digit phone number). Dispatchers receive these calls and then dispatch the appropriate responders whether it be police, fire, EMS, or a combination of those services. Dispatchers also are the people on the other end of the radio that assist first responders in the field with any number of requests, such as license and registration queries, sending tow trucks, requesting the highway department, or requesting backup from neighboring jurisdictions, to name just a few of their functions.

All of Vermont's six PSAPs also function as dispatch centers, but conversely, not all of Vermont's dispatch centers function as PSAPs, in fact most do not. Within a PSAP, the 911 call-taker and the dispatcher might be sitting in the same room, or might even be the same person. Some 911 call-takers are cross-trained as dispatchers and vice versa, but not all are cross-trained. There are approximately 30 dispatch centers in Vermont, including the six PSAPs, and in addition to that there are six (6) more dispatch centers that are located in neighboring states but provide dispatching services for first responder agencies in Vermont.

Nothing in the working group's report, and nothing in the legislation introduced by the Senate Government Operations Committee, proposes to change Vermont's existing E911 system. By all accounts Vermont has an outstanding E911 system; we are only talking about making changes to the dispatch system.

A key question that must be answered is whether public safety dispatching is a responsibility of State government, or whether it is a local responsibility. If it is a function of State government, then the service should be provided to all municipalities that want it. If it is a local responsibility, then the State should not be providing this service to any municipality. The current situation where some communities pay for dispatching while others do not, is not fair or equitable.

Currently there are approximately 31 Vermont municipalities that pay nothing for public safety dispatching because the State Police provide all dispatching services for free. (Barnard, Benson, Bethel, Braintree, Brandon, Castleton, Chelsea, Chittenden, Clarendon, Glastenbury, Glover, Goshen, Granville, Hubbardton, Ira, Killington, Leicester, Mount Holly, Pittsfield, Pittsford, Proctor, Rochester, Rutland Town, Sandgate, Shrewsbury, Stockbridge, Sunderland, Wallingford, Warren, West Haven, West Rutland)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are approximately 34 municipalities, like mine, that receive no dispatching assistance from the State Police, these municipalities provide for all of their own dispatching needs, either by doing it themselves or by paying another agency to provide the service. (Barre City, Barre Town, Bennington, Brattleboro, Burlington, Colchester, Essex Junction, Essex Town, Hardwick, Hartford, Hinesburg, Hyde Park, Johnson, Ludlow, Manchester, Milton, Montpelier, Morristown, Newport City, Norwich, Rutland City, St Albans City, St Albans Town, St Johnsbury, Shelburne, South Burlington, Springfield, Stowe, West Windsor, Windsor, Williston, Winooski, Wolcott, Woodstock)

The remaining 185 municipalities, give or take, fall somewhere in between, providing for some of their own dispatching needs but also receiving some from the State Police.

Regardless of which answer you arrive at, State responsibility or local responsibility, the State should ensure that whatever system we end up with, is implemented consistently across the State. It needs to be resilient to stand up to the harsh conditions that we frequently experience here in Vermont. It needs to offer redundancy or failover capabilities, so that if one site fails another site can pick up their workload without missing a call. It needs to eliminate the “dead spots” that still exist in the current system, places in the state that have no reliable radio or cellular coverage. And it needs to be built in compliance with nationally recognized standards and best practices.

What has brought us to where we are, is attempts in recent years by the Department of Public Safety to shed its responsibility for dispatching local first responders. The Department has been saying for years that this service that they provide to local agencies is not sustainable. As we move forward, a question that needs to be answered is, is the State prepared to force municipalities that don't want to leave the State Police dispatch service, to go find those dispatch services elsewhere? For example, town officials in Berlin and Northfield, whose police departments are currently dispatched by the State Police for free, have stated that they do not want to be dispatched by the Barre City or Montpelier police departments as proposed.

If we just hand out millions of dollars in grants to agencies that ask for them, and allow them to build their own systems without any guidance or oversight by the State, we could end up with a disjointed system that is not interoperable, and we will be encouraging these regional dispatch centers to continue to operate in silos.

I believe that the State should initiate an assessment of the current communications infrastructure and dispatching capabilities statewide, identify where the deficiencies are, and then create an intentionally planned network of dispatch centers that are resilient, interoperable, and provide equitable service for all Vermonters. I would further recommend that we begin with a pilot project. Rutland County appears to be the area where a regional dispatch center could provide the State Police with the greatest relief, so I would suggest starting there.

Once that pilot is up and running, additional dispatch centers can be established in other areas of the state using the lessons learned from that first project.

Another factor that needs to be considered is governance. Who will own the infrastructure and make policy decisions for these regional dispatch centers? What happens if the host agency decides to stop providing the service? For example, what if we stand up a new regional dispatch center that is operated by a sheriff's department, and four years later a new sheriff is elected and the new sheriff has no interest in operating a dispatch center, as we just saw take place in Orange County? Who then owns the equipment and who is responsible for keeping that dispatch center operational? Certainly the State Police are not going to want to take those customer towns back again just because of a personnel change in the sheriff's office. And in the case of municipally owned dispatch centers, should the customer towns and agencies have a say in how things are done, or should the police chief, city manager, or city council be able to just call all the shots and dictate the level of service that will be provided to those customer agencies that are paying for the service? I believe that any new regional dispatch centers that are created using state or federal funds, should be overseen by independent bodies that are not subservient to a mayor, a city council, a police chief, or a sheriff.

I would like to share some comments from individual members of the working group that were not included verbatim in the working group's report that you received.

Comments from Drew Hazelton, who represented EMS on the working group, referring to a competitive grant program that was being offered last summer by the Department of Public Safety: "In my opinion, the proposed funding does not provide for support for "regional" dispatch centers. It does provide support for dispatch centers, but does so without any standards that need to be met. It further fractures the communications structure in Vermont which will result in response delays and bad outcomes. In Windham County we will have five operating dispatch centers, with two or three active in each incident. I believe this proposal will meet the goal of removing work from DPS but will not provide modern or efficient dispatching services to the state."

Comments from Jack Helm, selectboard member from the Town of Benson: "Emergency services are a function of State government. Police, fire and emergency medical should be dispatched and supervised by the State Police. Any use of a third party system results in dropped calls and slow response times. Dispatchers should be in the same office as police barracks and should be state employees. All facilities should be delivering full services 24/7/365 without fail. The citizens of this State deserve more from government than what they are getting. The current plan is expensive and destined to fail."

I fully understand and appreciate the pressures that the Department of Public Safety is experiencing in trying to recruit and retain an adequate number of dispatch professionals to meet the current demands being placed upon them. And I agree that if ever there was a time to make transformational changes to the current system, it is now. However I believe that there needs to be some entity within State government to manage and oversee the transition to regional dispatching. Maybe the Department of Public Safety is the right agency to do that, maybe it's not. Senate bill S.139, introduced by the Senate Government Operations Committee, proposes to transform the current E911 Board into the entity that will oversee this transition; again, maybe that is the right entity to do it and maybe it's not, I'm not sure. But I do not believe that just awarding grant money to those agencies who ask for it, and letting them build their own dispatch centers in a non-synchronized way, is the right way to go.

An additional suggestion that came out of the Regional Dispatch Working Group but was not included as a formal recommendation, was the possible re-opening of one or both of the State-operated communications centers in Derby and Rutland that were closed in 2015. When the Department of Public Safety operated four communications centers it was able to draw its workforce from labor markets in all four corners of the state, as compared to the current two communications centers which draw personnel from a greatly reduced area.

Regarding the bill that is coming over from the Senate, S.139... I am hesitant to be critical of the bill because my working group had the opportunity to produce something better and we admittedly failed to do so. This is a very hard nut to crack. However, I do have some concerns about the current bill that I would be happy to share if the committee would like to hear them.

- From the beginning, everyone involved has consistently said “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” S.139 even states in the bill that it is the intent to “not disrupt or in any way jeopardize either the exceptional dispatch services currently in place or the existing E911 system.” However the bill then goes on to bring all dispatch centers under the purview of a new Public Safety Communications Board, including existing highly-functional dispatch centers, and it also forces all municipalities to pay an annual dispatch assessment into a new Regional Dispatch Fund, including those municipalities that are currently self-sufficient. The bill does not have any carve-out for municipalities that currently provide their own dispatching services for their own emergency responders and simply wish to be left alone to take care of their own needs at their own expense.
- The bill does not directly address the issue that was the driving force behind getting us to where we have come over the past year, that being the need for DPS to shed its responsibility to dispatch for the many local first responder agencies that currently receive that service for free.
- The proposed funding formula is confusing and based on a statewide base fee and a statewide dispatch budget. It will be impossible for municipalities to look at this formula and be able to figure out, for budgeting purposes, what their annual assessment will be.
- Another factor in the funding formula is a municipality’s “call volume” but the bill does not include a definition of that term or explain how a municipality’s call volume will be calculated. The list of different call types that a fire, EMS, or law enforcement agency might respond to is lengthy and not all call types result in the same level of workload for a dispatch center.
- Last year’s legislation that created the Regional Dispatch Working Group charged the group with identifying a long-term funding model that does not unduly affect local property taxes. However, the funding model proposed by S.139 relies almost entirely on local property taxes.

In closing I would like to thank you, Chair McCarthy and the rest of the committee for inviting me to meet with you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have, and I will do my best to make myself available in the future as you dig into this subject further.