



southburlington

VERMONT

Senate Committee on Finance

An act relating to the modernization of public safety communications in Vermont (S.139)

March 30, 2023

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Good afternoon, Madame Chair and the Committee. My name is Jessie Baker and I have the privilege of serving as the City Manager for the City of South Burlington and I currently service as the Board President for the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. I have also served as the South Burlington representative to the Chittenden County Public Safety Authority.

I am honored to talk with you today about S.139. Clearly there are significant challenges operating the State-wide 911 system and partnering dispatch systems. This is further complicated by (1) areas of Vermont where the State provides comprehensive service to volunteer and nonprofit organizations and (2) areas of the State where municipalities are key partners in this service provision. I'm speaking to you today as the latter. Dispatch services – the local connections to our State partners taking the 911 calls – are absolutely critical to providing core municipal services in our population centers. This partnership allows my 7 locally employed and professional dispatchers the ability to provide excellent information to my 36 professional Firefighters/EMTs and 39 sworn Police Officers. It's what keeps them safe on the street as they provide critical emergency response to our residents, businesses, and visitors.

S.139 as written proposes that the State usurp (pg 4) this local control which I'm sure you know will be very controversial. And these big conversations are required to fix a broken and inequitable system.

As you have these hard conversations, especially with a focus on the parts of Vermont where there are not municipally employed professional public safety staff, please do not erode existing systems that are working at the local level. Please help us invest in local and regional services that allow us to provide this service more efficiently.

For the past four decades – and much more actively since our six successful Town Meeting Day votes in 2018, your Chittenden County communities have worked to stand up a regional dispatch center (Chittenden County Public Safety Authority.) We have learned some hard lessons – that I share in order to inform important future discussions:

- **Governance** – We were working with six managers, police and fire chiefs, and elected bodies. All had to be heard and integrated into the decision-making process. The new Board will face the same.
- **Operations** – To start up such a new center, we can't take down our existing centers. We need to build a whole new system while maintaining excellent current systems.
- Which leads to **funding** – It is expensive. Our FY24 projections are that it will take \$3.5M to start up this new regional center – this is just for capital and pre-operational startup funding.

Please focus on these three areas when thinking about how to stand up a State-wide system.

With that background, I'd like to provide some specific comments on S.139 as drafted.

I appreciate the focus on staff recruitment and retention. This is a huge part of my daily job – not just for dispatchers but for the police officers and firefighters/EMTs for whom the dispatchers are their lifelines. How will this State-wide system solve this problem? How will we maintain the excellent staff we have now through this transition? They must be part of the solution.

In 7051(17) (pg 7) I recommend adding a single municipality that has entered into a shared services agreement with other municipalities to provide this service. This may be eligible under B but as models are outlined, this is an effective one that could be used throughout the State with potentially simpler governance structures.

In 7052(b) (pg 9) I recommend specifically naming the appointment of a Fire Chief from the Career Chiefs and a manager. While I certainly appreciate hearing the voice of the providers (firefighters and paramedics), the challenge is that, by Statute, Chiefs and Managers in your population centers are responsible for operations. **This new State-wide system will be intricately linked to how local and municipally employed police officers, firefighters, and paramedics are kept safe and able to provide for the safety of their communities.** I believe the leadership (fire chiefs and managers) must be named in addition to police chiefs.

7053 (pg 12) states that the “Board shall be the single governmental agency responsible for the statewide system” including promulgating standards to many other regional governmental entities. Given this, I suggest the Committee give some thought to expertise in legal liability, labor management, and equitable employment and service delivery. Who will hold these responsibilities? Being perceived as “outside” of another governmental system that employs such resources (HR, Finance, Legal) may be a challenge and add significant cost on the back end.

7053(d) (pg 15) outlines the requirements of regional dispatch centers. Funding is required now to do this work so as to effectively partner. With a deadline of July 1, 2025 (19-20 months after the session) for every agency to join a regional center, work must be underway now.

I’d suggest you may want the plans submitted to also include regional governance structures and community involvement. As these will be separately employed and established entities, I’d imagine you’d want those structures to be clear. And, while I’m talking about governance structures, pg 30 outlines the design standards for regional systems. There needs to be a statement on governance expectations. Will these still be required to go through the legislative Union Municipal District processes? In which case, this can take several years. Or will you provide some exemption to start up these separately established organizations?

7054a (pg 18/19) talks about the Regional Dispatch Fund. I recommend disbursements are specifically allowable for capital and fit-up startup costs, staffing costs, and costs to establish governance systems and hold public votes. As I stated earlier, while we maintain the current operational efforts (fly the plane as we build it) it’s imperative that the State recognizes and funds the added one-time costs associated with building new.

7054(f) (pg 19) then goes on to talk about the funding formula. “B” and “R” are unknowable until the research (identified on page 29-30) is conducted. I suggest that this formula not be codified until we truly understand the scope of this new local property tax demand and how funding will truly need to be identified from State coffers and the local tax rate.

Beyond that, I have additional concerns about this funding formula as it seems to be modeled after the Education Funding Formula.

- Is it income sensitized? How will this be administered at the State level?
- How will it account for different salary requirements or building costs statewide?
- What other lessons have we learned from the Statewide education funding formula that we could apply here?
- As this will be a new demand on the local property tax rate in many communities, what if a community fails to ratify such a cost? Will they be disconnected from this system? Will they have to cut other local services (such as managing land records or plowing) in order to achieve voter approvable budgets?
- Can members of a regional system pay in more for increased specialized services beyond state established standards?
- These questions could all be answered after the study is complete and recommendations made.

Page 30 talks about the “design” of building a system. On page 31 (H) it says the Board will “seek to establish at least one new regional dispatch center....that provides service in areas of the State that presently face significant challenges...” This seems to suggest that a municipally based solution is not prioritized. I’d recommend that this be changed to allow for a model where services are currently low and a model in a population center where municipalities are not necessarily facing this challenge but must be part of a long-term solution.

Section 5 “Appropriation Transfer” (pg 34). There has been a lot of past work and talk about the previously allocated \$11M. This needs to get out the door as soon as possible to help those of us working on it at the local level be part of the solution. And those dollars need to be directed specifically to equipment, capital fit up, and staffing needs to get there. Again, we are flying the airplane as we are building it and one-time significant dollars are needed. If this is truly an “essential function of the State” the State needs to fund the solutions. At CCPSA alone there is a \$3.5M price tag to stand up the regional center.

I sincerely appreciate the Committee’s willingness to consider my testimony on S.139. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

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