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Senate Government Operations

An act relating to the modernization of emergency communications in Vermont (DR 23-0775)

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Jessie Baker, City Manager

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 to you today about the Emergency Response Communications Committee Bill. As you can imagine, with 36 Firefighters/EMTs, 38 sworn Police Officers, and 7 locally employed dispatchers, we are interested in this bill and how future emergency communications may support South Burlington in continuing to provide local public safety and first responder services. Today I hold the values of ensuring that South Burlington residents and businesses continue to get the stellar services they receive from our staff for the next three years and for the decades to come. I also want to ensure that our current employees and local policy makers are heard, appreciated, and safe during these critical state-wide discussions.

I'd like to share some brief history with you and then offer some suggestions.

As you know, Chittenden County has identified a regional dispatch center as a model for many decades with the goals of reducing response time, improving mutual aid and communications between municipalities, increasing the number of dispatchers on at any one time (many communities only have one), and providing improved oversight and management. The Board of Directors faces several hurdles to provide regional services – that I share in order to inform important future discussions:

- **Governance** – We were working with seven managers, police and fire chiefs, and elected bodies. All had to be heard and integrated into the decision-making process.
- **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.

While we were thankful for the State and Federal grants received (total of \$1.7M) this meant that the local taxpayers had to invest another \$1.8M while still paying for existing dispatch centers and staffing. And now we understand that the \$11M previously allocated for such demonstration efforts is being held back for this conversation. Without the access to the \$758k previously allocated to CCSPA and an additional capital/fit-up grant, we are unable to move

forward with the CCPSA Regional Dispatch Center and the example we were hoping to provide to the State of what a locally supported regional dispatch model could look like.

It is also critical that future bills allow for capital investment and fit-up costs associated with building new centers in order to get over those one-time expense hurdles of building a new system while continuing to operate current systems.

So, within the themes of governance, operations, and funding, I offer the following thoughts (and some questions) on the proposed legislation:

- A more equitable system of providing emergency communications State-wide is certainly needed.
- Throughout these important conversations, we need to maintain the current dispatch centers that are working well, ensure that the staff is heard in the process, and understand what is coming next.
- If the consideration is that a centralized State group will set technical and operational standards for local dispatch centers – overseen by managers and local elected officials – there needs to be representation of those individuals on the Emergency Communications Advisory Committee. I'd recommend a Town/City Manager from a community with full time police and fire be added to the Advisory Committee. Critical to our success as managers, is our ability to ensure that excellent communications happen between the caller, dispatcher, and first responder.
- I applaud the Committee on including language to develop an inventory of existing infrastructure, equipment, facilities, hardware, software, staffing, and local appropriations. This data collection is critical before future decisions are made about operations, control, and funding. Going back – the current system needs to continue until the moment a new system is fully built out and operational. I don't believe we will know the funding required for this until the inventory is completed and good governance systems are developed.
- If the Board is tasked with establishing standard, operating procedures, and minimum staffing requirements AND IF municipalities will be expected to continue operating these centers, attention needs to be paid to overhead costs (management, legal, human resources, and financial operations) as well as costs associated with impact bargaining these expectations.
- Finally, it's always hard to build a new system while running a current system. Different skill sets, management practices, and use of political capital is needed. I'd encourage the Committee to think about how to bring the right resources to both halves of this conversation – maintaining services and modernizing services.

I sincerely appreciate the Committee's willingness to consider testimony on DR 23-0775. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

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