

Paul White – 01/25/2023

My notes for testimony – Senate Government Operations Committee

This working group was created by the Legislature (in Section E.209.1 of Act 185, the FY23 Appropriations Bill) to report back on “the new regional dispatch model” however, the “new model” was not identified.

Essentially the Legislature took five police officers, a firefighter and a paramedic, two selectboard members, and the State 911 director, and asked us to come together as a group and find a solution in four months to an issue that has existed for decades, without the benefit of any professional subject matter experts to guide and assist us in our work. It is not my intent to dismiss the knowledge and abilities 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, is not qualified to identify funding mechanisms or to chart the path toward a new regional model.

As others may have already told you, the Legislature and the Administration need to decide whether it accepts public safety dispatching as being a function of State government, or whether it considers this to be a local responsibility. If it is a function of State government, then the service needs to 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 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, Glazenbury, 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 for 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.

As we move forward, is the State prepared to force municipalities that don't want to leave the State Police dispatch service, to find those dispatch services elsewhere? Recent applicants for the grant funding currently being offered by DPS have stated in their applications how many agencies they claim that they can take away from the State's workload, but what if those agencies don't want to go along? For example, town officials in Berlin and Northfield have stated that they do not want to be dispatched by Montpelier.

Regardless of which answer you arrive at, State responsibility or local responsibility, the State has an obligation to 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 beat. 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. It needs to be built in compliance with nationally recognized standards and best practices.

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 first 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.

Another factor that needs to be considered is governance. Who will own and make decisions for these regional dispatch centers? 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? 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 would like to share some comments from individual members of the working group that were not included verbatim in the working group's report.

Comments from Drew Hazelton, who represented EMS on the working group: "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. I would be more than willing to discuss this at length should the opportunity present itself. 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 they’re not, but I don’t believe that just putting taxpayer dollars into the hands of those agencies who asked for them, and letting them build their own dispatch centers in a non-synchronized way, is the right way to go.

I would like to address former-Commissioner Mike Schirling’s comments (paraphrasing): that numerous studies have been done and reports have been written regarding the most efficient way to deliver statewide public safety communications (call taking and emergency service dispatching), and that these reports and studies have consistently recommended a statewide system of shared services through regionalization. It is my understanding that these previous reports and studies have in fact recommended regionalization, but regionalization within DPS. DPS has already consolidated their dispatch operations regionally, twice in fact. 25 years ago DPS provided dispatching services from each of the 12 VSP field stations that existed at that time, as well as from the department’s headquarters

in Waterbury (13 total sites). In the early 2000's the dispatching function was consolidated into four (4) regional sites in Williston, Derby, Rutland, and Rockingham. Then in 2015, dispatching operations were further consolidated into the two (2) sites that currently remain, Williston and Westminster. I do not believe that any of those old reports and studies recommended that DPS get completely out of the business of dispatching for small municipal agencies.