



DISPATCH OPERATIONS AND OPTIONS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

June 4, 2021

How are public safety calls currently dispatched? Both 911 emergency calls 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 request for DPW services is 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).

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 into 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	Three+ (including dedicated call takers, Fire dispatchers, Police dispatchers)
Computer Aided Dispatch	Outdated	Yes
APCO and NFPA Standards	Most	Yes
Yearly Operating Costs:		
Staffing	\$391,612	\$ 0 (10 year contract)
Software Fees	15,000	\$ 0
Less Grants	(70,000)	\$ 0
Net Town Expense:	\$335,722	\$ 0



Police Lobby Staffing: Included in above **\$46,000 to \$250,000***

Immediate Capital Needs:

CAD Dispatch Software \$190,000 **\$18,000 Safe Lobby**

Long Term Capital Needs (6-8 years):

Software/hardware \$200,000 **\$0 (state provided)**

* 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.

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.

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 part time receptionists for varying levels of coverage. There are numerous models that are working for other communities that we could explore.

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)



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 operations must be approved at Town Meeting.

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. 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.