

Inside Columbia 9-1-1 Communications District *continued from front page*

this way. “This allows us a little more freedom to do what we need to do, get business done, and not have to rely on someone else’s budget,” explains Hilsinger.

Columbia 9-1-1 is managed by a five member Board of Directors who are elected by the public from five regional zones that cover the five main communities in Columbia County; Board members serve four year terms. The current Board includes: Dee Wooley from Clatskanie, Sean Clark from Rainier, Henry Heimuller from St. Helens, Dave Crawford from Vernonia/Mist, and Rob Anderson from Scappoose. Crawford is the former Fire Chief of the Mist-Birkenfeld Fire District. A Budget Committee, made up of an appointed representative from each zone, works with staff to plan and manage the District’s finances. Randy Hanson is the current Budget Committee member for Vernonia/Mist. To further help ensure maximum efficiency in operations an Advisory Board, made up of the Chiefs of every public safety, emergency agency, and other user agencies in the County, meets four times a year.

Daily operations are run by the staff, including an Executive Director, Operations Manager, and Communications Manager. Currently the Executive Director position is being filled by Interim Executive Director Brian Burrigh. Burrigh, a former Division Chief with Columbia River Fire and Rescue, has filled the position since May 2017. Columbia 9-1-1 is currently searching for a new permanent Executive Director.

Hilsinger is the overall Operations Manager. Diana Karthaus is the Communications Manager and oversees the dispatch center and the Communication Specialists staff that work there.

According to Hilsinger the bulk of Columbia 9-1-1’s budget goes towards personnel services and equipment. Because of the seriousness of the job and the high level of stress their Communication Specialist positions experience, a lot of time and attention goes into personnel services for hiring staff, maintaining them, and training them. Hilsinger says Columbia 9-1-1 currently has 12 dispatchers on staff and are always looking to identify potential candidates interested in a career in public safety.

Dispatchers sit or stand at a multi-screen, adjustable computer console where they can monitor the availability of area hospitals, track locations

of officers and other responders, and take and place radio and telephone calls. Light bars at each console station let anyone in the room know who is currently on the telephone or radio with a call.

Maintaining equipment also requires time and funding. “Technology is

and cell phone bills, along with a local tax levy approved by local voters. The local tax levy is up for renewal this year and will be on the election ballot in November.

Columbia 9-1-1 has recently been implementing Text to 9-1-1 through a pilot project in the Portland Metro area

In addition to police, fire and medical emergency calls, Columbia 9-1-1 also answers alarm calls and partners with security agencies, answers non-emergency calls and after hours calls for local public safety agencies, including the county probation office, and local public works departments. They also assist agencies with things like contacting towing services and mental health transports or crisis intervention teams when needed.

Columbia 9-1-1 dispatchers are trained to provide lifesaving medical instruction. “That is one of our key services we provide for the citizens of our County,” says Hilsinger. “We can give instructions for how to perform the Heimlich Maneuver, or CPR, or even how to initially treat a burn, while responders are on their way to assist with a patient.”

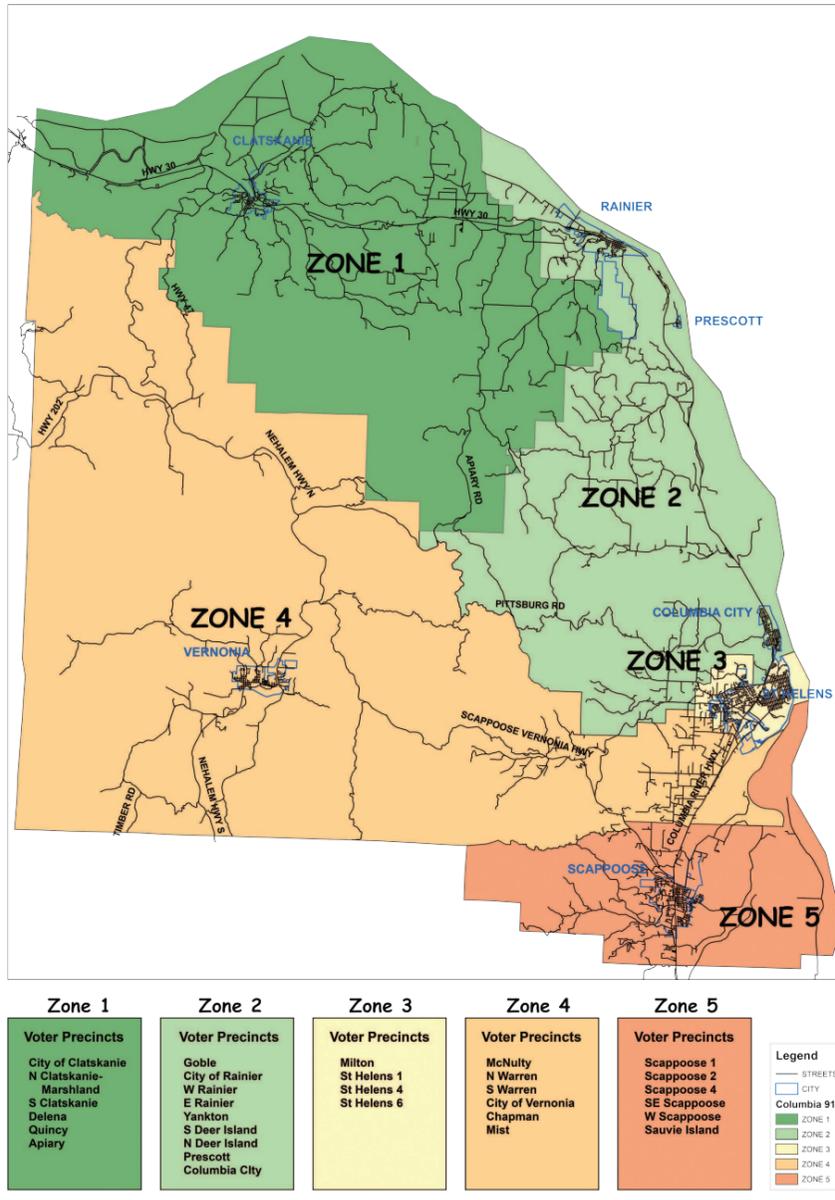
Dispatchers also provide data entry services for agencies for traffic stops, warrants, missing persons, stolen items, “... anything that would go into a state or national system – we have the ability to input that for our agencies,” says Hilsinger.

Although statistics for 2016-17 were not yet available, in 2015-16 Columbia 9-1-1 took 55,939 non-emergency calls, 8,133 land-line 9-1-1 calls, and 17,152 cell phone 9-1-1 calls. In 2017 Columbia 9-1-1 received 64 Text to 9-1-1 “sessions” generating 221 incoming messages and 176 outgoing messages. All those calls led to a total of 76,054 dispatches to multiple agencies. All traffic stops in the County totaled 9,351.

The Columbia 9-1-1 building contains several large conference and meeting rooms, designed to be converted to Emergency Command Centers in the case of a large or regional disaster.

Hilsinger says there are some big projects on the horizon for Columbia 9-1-1, including the installation of a new radio tower which will improve service in the south part of the County, along with some frequency adjustments to the radio system which will mitigate some ongoing interference issues. Hilsinger said they are currently completing a project to upgrade their CAD information system in partnership with Washington and Clackamas counties and the Lake Oswego Police Department, which will put all those agencies on the same system and allow joint communication among the agencies. In addition, upgrades to the radio consoles in the dispatch center are an upcoming priority.

Columbia 911 Voter Zone Map



the backbone of everything we do,” says Hilsinger. “We have phone systems, radio systems, computer systems, and a building we have to maintain.”

Other staff include a GIS Specialist for mapping and a CAD Specialist for the computer information system, along with several administrative support personnel positions.

Columbia 9-1-1 is funded through tax dollars collected by the State of Oregon as a surcharge on telephone

in 2016. Text to 9-1-1 will allow someone that is unable speak to a dispatcher to request assistance. This service is not yet available to the entire County. “We tell people ‘Call when you can, text when you can’t,’ because a telephone call is much more efficient in communicating information,” says Hilsinger. She says she expects use of Text to 9-1-1 to increase in the future as more cell towers are installed and technological advances continue in the region.

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