

New 911 dispatch agency taking shape

Commissioners have concerns about fairness

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

With remodeling at the John Day Fire Hall and installation of emergency communications equipment underway, the Grant County Emergency Communications Agency is slated to take over 911 dispatch services from the city of John Day on Jan. 1.

An intergovernmental agreement between the county, eight cities, one community and three rural fire districts spells out how the new agency will operate and be funded under an Intergovernmental Council.

The IGC approved the agreement Aug. 13, and the John Day City Council approved the agreement along with an ordinance ratifying the creation of the new dispatch service Sept. 11.

Agency structure

The Intergovernmental Council will oversee the agency's budget and determine each member's share of the operating costs. The IGC cannot impose taxes or expend more funds than it receives.

A User Board made up of 12 fire departments, the John Day police, sheriff's office, county road department, Oregon Department of Forestry, Forest Service and Blue Mountain Hospital District will develop and recommend operational priorities, policies and procedures, advise on budget matters and conduct an annual review of the dispatch center for quality assurance.

Nonvoting User Board members will include Life Flight, AirLink, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Oregon State Police and Community Counseling Solutions.

Under a cost-sharing formula included in the intergovernmental agreement, the county's share of the statewide 911 phone tax and any other payments to the dispatch agency will first be applied to pay for operational costs.

The remaining cost share will be paid by user fees and taxing jurisdictions. Dispatch users will be charged \$10 per projected call based on a five-year rolling average, with Blue Mountain Hospital District being charged \$50 per call. Grant County and the eight cities will pay their portion of the cost share based on the property tax assessed value of each taxing



The Eagle/Richard Hanners

From left, John Day Police Chief Mike Durr and John Day Emergency Communications Center Dispatch Manager Valerie Maynard listen as the city council adopts an ordinance to create the Grant County Emergency Communications Center Sept. 11.

jurisdiction.

In an example provided in the agreement, the total cost of operations was \$470,000 and the county's share of the 911 phone tax was \$270,000, leaving a \$200,000 cost share.

User fees totaled \$76,706, or about 38 percent of the cost share. The sheriff's office, for example, averaged 2,856 calls, which amounted to 14.3 percent of the cost share at \$10 per call. Blue Mountain Hospital District averaged 665 calls, which amounted to 8.3 percent of the cost share at \$25 per call.

The remaining cost share after user fees totaled \$123,294. Grant County's portion of the cost share came to \$88,953 or about 43 percent of the cost share. John Day's portion came to \$15,830 or about 7.8 percent. The individual portion of the cost share for the other seven cities was 3 percent or less.

County concerns

The Grant County Court held a public hearing and first reading on the intergovernmental agreement and an ordinance to ratify creation of the new dispatch service Sept. 12. A vote will take place after a second reading at their Sept. 26 meeting.

The court's reaction was not all positive. Commissioner Jim Hamsher noted that County Counsel Ron Yockim had questions about the agreement, including how property tax assessed value was determined.

Commissioner Rob Raschio said he recognized the need for a 911 system, but he had concerns about the structure of the Intergovernmental Council. Both John Day and Prairie City would each have two votes — one for

the city and one for the rural fire department — while the county would have only one, he said.

Raschio noted that the state legislature might consider doubling the 911 phone tax from 75 cents per phone per month to \$1.50. In that case, the local dispatch agency's share of the statewide revenue could increase from \$270,000 to \$540,000, which would more than cover the current annual operational costs.

With concerns to iron out and a Jan. 1 effective date, Hamsher suggested delaying the vote if necessary and approving the new agency with an emergency ordinance.

Grant County Judge Scott Myers, however, noted that he preferred to use emergency ordinances for emergencies and not for time-saving measures. He said the agreement seemed reasonable and was not a money-maker for anyone — it would make the 911 system solvent.

911 tax bill

It was lobbying by local officials to change the state 911 phone tax that persuaded state Rep. Lynn Findley to take action, he told constituents in John Day on Sept. 13. Citing his experience as a city manager in Vale, Findley said he was "flabbergasted" that the dispatch center in John Day could operate on its small budget.

Findley said he spoke to state Sen. Cliff Bentz about carrying a bill in next year's legislative session to increase the tax and was advised that the 911 tax comes up every session and he should expect some opposition.

Findley said he fundamentally opposes raising taxes, but doubling the 911 phone tax from 75 cents to \$1.50 was the right thing to do. It's been more than 30 years since the bill was created with no change to the tax, and many people who benefit from 911 dispatch service are visitors to Eastern Oregon's rural areas, he pointed out.

The 911 tax bill needs to be put on the radar to generate legislative support, Findley said. The current tax will sunset in 2021, a provision he wants to remove from the new bill. Findley said he also wants to change how 911 tax revenue is distributed so more of the "new" money from the increase goes to small communities.

Findley said Bentz will carry a similar bill in the senate. It was too early to judge the likelihood of the bill's passing, he said.

High-tech solutions to water storage

Pilot project could involve underground 3D mapping

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

One of the biggest issues facing farmers and residents in Grant County's high desert region is water.

The John Day River Basin receives a significant amount of water in winter when demand is low, Grant Soil & Water District Manager Jason Kehrberg said, but much of it runs off in spring, leaving a shortage in late summer when demand is high.

Finding a way to retain that spring runoff so it can be utilized by farmers and residents throughout the year is a technical problem that involves geological, engineering, ecological and even political factors.

The conventional solution over the past century has been dams and reservoirs. Interest in constructing a water impoundment in Grant County increased after the state removed the Canyon Meadows Dam following the 2015 Canyon Creek Complex fire.

Built in the 1960s, the dam was owned by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and was located on Forest Service land. During a public hearing in Canyon City in October 2015, state officials said multiple studies over the years concluded that the dam was unsafe and should be removed.

Residents and county officials criticized the decision, noting that the Canyon Meadows Dam was an important resource and scenic recreational area. Grant County Judge Scott Myers told the Eagle the governor's office offered to support the county's effort to fund a new dam and impoundment, either at the same site or elsewhere.

But dams are barriers to fish passage, and sunlight can warm reservoir water, which also negatively impacts fish. Any streams that are habitat for fish listed under the Endangered Species Act are not likely to be considered for an impoundment project, Kehrberg said.

High-tech mapping

New technology has presented an alternative solution for water retention — storing water underground. High-tech three-dimensional geological mapping can identify permeable or fractured subsurface layers where water could be stored.

Aqua Geo Frameworks, a Nebraska company that performs this kind of mapping, gave a presentation about its airborne electromagnetic surveys to local officials last year, Kehrberg said.

The company uses helicopters equipped with a large diamond-shaped net hanging from a cable to survey geological features

hundreds of feet below the surface. Power lines interfere with the signal, so surveys can't be conducted over certain areas, Kehrberg said.

The mapping can be expensive, but the Grant Soil & Water District is considering a pilot project in Grant County that would involve redirecting spring runoff to an area where an underground aquifer could be recharged through percolation.

Once underground, the water could then move to other locations over time, recharging other aquifers or reaching surface water such as streams. Ecological benefits are possible in addition to increasing water availability to farmers and residents.

To prove the feasibility of the new technology, the Grant Soil & Water District would choose flatter terrain, which is best for water storage and a site where irrigation is already in place, Kehrberg said.

The Oregon Water Resources Department offers feasibility grants that could fund such a pilot project, as well as implementation grants that could assist with any infrastructure costs, Kehrberg said. The grants typically require a match, so the district would need a partner for the project, he said.

Water committee

The new technology is also supported by a group of citizens interested in forming a water resource committee to advise the Grant County Court. Commissioner Rob Raschio told the court Sept. 12 that he had met with Grant County Watermaster Eric Julsrud and Shaun Robertson about establishing such a committee and asked that the proposal be placed on the court agenda in October.

Julsrud said committee proponents presented creative "out of the box" ideas to increase the timing when water would be available, mostly by holding back spring runoff. He noted, while the ideas were reasonable, changing infrastructure and the status quo could be difficult.

The committee would not need specific state authority to operate and could present demonstration projects to the state for funding, Julsrud said.

Commissioner Jim Hamsher pointed out that Dixie Creek, which is an important water source for Prairie City, floods in the spring but runs dry in drought years by late summer.

The John Day River Basin is over-appropriated, meaning water rights and claims amount to more than the known availability of water. Computer modeling programs could be used to determine if certain subbasins could sustain new reservoirs, Julsrud said.

Myers told the Eagle that a creek in the Izee area had been studied for a potential impoundment, but the creek could only recharge the reservoir for about a month. The limited recharge time made the site infeasible, he said.

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Committees are formal public bodies required to comply with Oregon Public Meetings Law ORS 192.610.

Senior Citizens Advisory Council ORS 410.210. Five members serve three year terms and meet semi-annually to define the needs of older adults, promote special interests and local community involvement, and represent senior citizens as an advocate to the local, state and federal government and other organizations.

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Hello Grant County,

It is sure starting to feel like fall! School has started and the mornings and evenings are cooler. There was even some snow on some neighboring mountains last week!

This time of year brings something else too, the annual Chamber of Commerce Installation Dinner. This year the dinner will be held September 26th. We will have it at the John Day Elks Lodge again this year.

Dinner will be provided by the Chamber. All members are invited and encouraged to bring a guest. Social hour is from 5:00 to 6:00. Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM. Please RSVP by Friday, September 26th. You can call or email us at the Chamber office - 541-575-0547 or gadmin@gcOregonlive.com. Our guest speaker this year will be Colby Marshall from the Silvies Valley Ranch. We will have a raffle following the dinner and we are accepting items for the raffle. If you would like to donate a raffle item, please give us a call.

With Fall, our spring and summer tourist season is wrapping up and the local museums will be closing. I believe we had a very good year! Records for the number of visitors have been broken at all of our museums.

Visitors have told us that they love visiting Grant County and many of them will be coming back.

The hunting seasons bring more folks and we will be ready for them as always. Let's show them why Grant County is such a great place to be.

See everyone at the next meeting on Thursday @ Noon no-host lunch at the Outpost.

Enjoy Fall in beautiful Grant County!

Tammy Bremner
Manager
Grant County Chamber of Commerce

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