



Jennifer Peden monitors multiple computer screens at Astoria 911 Dispatch.

COLIN MURPHEY/THE DAILY ASTORIAN

CROSSED WIRES

South County emergency responders look to fix spotty radio communications

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

For emergency responders in Cannon Beach, being able to communicate with dispatch over the radio while on a call in certain parts of South County is always a gamble.

For years, some areas south of Tillamook Head have earned reputations as perpetual dead zones: Haystack Heights. Sections of Tolovana. Large chunks of the beach. Even parts of downtown.

So far, these gaps have not led to serious incidents, though some situations teeter too close for comfort. Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn remembers one officer's struggle to call for backup in a dead spot near Tolovana during a drunken-driving test on the side of the road.

"That's their lifeline," Schermerhorn said.

Radio communication can be so spotty near Hug Point that Fire Chief Matt Benedict recalls a rescue operation where he was close enough to see his crew and still not able to reach them on the radio.

"It's a big safety issue," Benedict said. "If I'm going to send some individuals into a burning house on a repeated channel I may not be able to hear them even if I'm able to see them."

It's an issue that has plagued the region for years, and unforgiving topography is mostly to blame. From Cannon Beach to Falcon Cove, mountainous terrain between radio repeaters and the one radio tower on Tillamook Head interferes with the signals that bounce between Seaside Dispatch and first responders.

Though there is nothing

they can do about the mountain range, the chiefs have been looking at ways to make communications more reliable.

Schermerhorn is applying for a \$130,000 grant to install a new tower near Old Cannon Beach Road on the north end of town that would fill the gap between an area known as "the S curves" and Tillamook Head.

One of the difficulties Cannon Beach faces, Schermerhorn said, is that the main tower on Tillamook Head is not owned by the city, which means the repeaters can be moved around by the private owner.

"One was lowered last year, and it made communicating more difficult for Hamlet Fire," Schermerhorn said.

The fire district, however, sees switching from Seaside Dispatch to Astoria 911 Dispatch as a possible solution.

Gentlemen's agreement

For as long as anyone can remember, Cannon Beach and Seaside have had a gentlemen's agreement to use Seaside Dispatch.

When Benedict took over as fire chief in 2016, he noticed the communication issues and asked Seaside about what could be done. But beyond the upkeep of existing repeaters, he said there isn't much more the dispatch center could provide.

So Benedict began conversations with Astoria 911 Dispatch, which has spent about \$3 million on improvements to its system since 2007, said Jeff Rusiecki, the emergency communications manager at Astoria 911 Dispatch.

"The 2007 storm really caught the county by surprise

with how vulnerable our communications were," Rusiecki said.

After having major sites fail, Astoria began submitting grants, securing additional repeater sites and syncing them up to make a more cohesive countywide system.

By moving to Astoria, Cannon Beach could work off 10 towers across the county rather than relying solely on the one on Tillamook Head, Benedict said, improving communication quality.

The fire district could also save some money in the long run, Benedict said. Every call that is dispatched through Seaside costs Cannon Beach fire and police roughly \$35 in comparison to Astoria, which would charge about \$22 a call.

"This isn't so much cost-driven as safety-driven. I'm not saying we're right and Seaside's wrong or Seaside's right and we're wrong," Rusiecki said. "Because we have the county, we have an interest in improving communications throughout the county, and Cannon Beach is just one of those challenging areas."

An extra step

Mitch Brown, the communications manager at the Seaside Police Department, said topographical barriers remain a challenge. Conversations about installing a tower at the new Seaside School District campus have begun, but for now remain just discussions.

"It can be difficult, but we've never had any serious accidents," Brown said.

Schermerhorn and Brown share reservations about the fire district contracting with Astoria,

however, raising concerns that the change could mean more call transfers, which lead to slower dispatch times for fire calls.

"If a change happens, there will be delays," Brown said. "There will be the extra step to transfer fire calls to Astoria ... then they will have to request our units for mutual aid."

Rusiecki and Benedict believe the extra time the transfers will take will be small, but they recognize more unknowns can happen when more transfers are introduced.

Ideally, Rusiecki and Benedict would like to see a simplified, centralized dispatch center — a goal the county has discussed in the past and the state has recommended.

Besides being a costly endeavor, Rusiecki said, consolidating 911 operations is controversial because it would likely lead to shuttering the holding cells in Seaside's dispatch center. Unlike Astoria, Seaside's dispatchers have multiple jobs at the police department, such as record- and evidence-keeping, and monitoring the holding cells.

"If our dispatch went away, you'd have to look at filling those positions, and you'd be losing the state 911 funds that pay for these positions," Brown said. "The city wouldn't be gaining anything from losing a dispatch center."

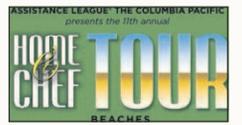
For now, Astoria 911 Dispatch will continue working on system improvements and the fire district will monitor how it works, Benedict said, before making any decisions.

But one reality is agreed upon.

"We're not going to get anywhere without 911 in the middle," Rusiecki said.

Annual home tour coming to Gearhart

Seaside Signal



Assistance League of the Columbia Pacific presents their 11th annual Home & Chef Tour, "The Beaches," Saturday, Oct. 13, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Six wonderful homes will be opened in Pinehurst, Surf Pines, The Highlands, The Reserve and Gearhart locations.

Each home will offer delicious bites prepared by a local chef including Nisa's Thai Kitchen, Fulios, El Cartin Mexican Cuisine, The Wayfarer and The Sweet Shop, and feature floral arrangements from Natural Nook, Blooming Crazy, Erickson's and Elizabeth Bunce.

Tickets are \$30, available now through event day at Holly McHone, 1150 Commercial St, Astoria, Columbia Bank locations in Seaside, As-

toria, and Warrenton and online at assistanceleaguecp.org.

Home & Chef Tour "The Beaches" directly benefits Assistance League of the Columbia Pacific's Operation School Bell Program which in 2018-19 will provide new clothing to over 700 Clatsop County school children. The home tour is the non-profit volunteer organization's major fundraiser.

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Seaside Signal

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Firewood permits are sold by management basin, and purchasers can cut anywhere not shown as a restricted area. A map can be found by visiting <https://www.oregon.gov/ODF/Working/Pages/Firewood.aspx>.

To purchase a permit, visit the Oregon Department of Forestry's Astoria Office at 92219 Highway 202, Astoria.

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