

Challenges at 911 dispatch centers revive consolidation talks

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

After more than 20 years of on-and-off discussions about consolidation, Astoria and Seaside are evaluating whether to combine emergency dispatch centers.

Sheriff Matt Phillips said the Clatsop County Sheriff's Office has strongly supported the concept for years and believes a single countywide 911 dispatch center would be in the best interests of the public and emergency responders.

Staffing shortages at Astoria's dispatch center reached a critical point last fall, prompting the city to temporarily move operations to Seaside.

Astoria plans to resume normal operations in the coming months, but the temporary merger has pinpointed deficiencies in technology and interoperability that have left many emergency responders on the North Coast frustrated.

"The temporary merger of the two 911 centers has demonstrated the model can work," Phillips said in an email. "The merger also highlighted and brought to the forefront portions of the communications infrastructure which has failed, is failing or just didn't exist but needs to."

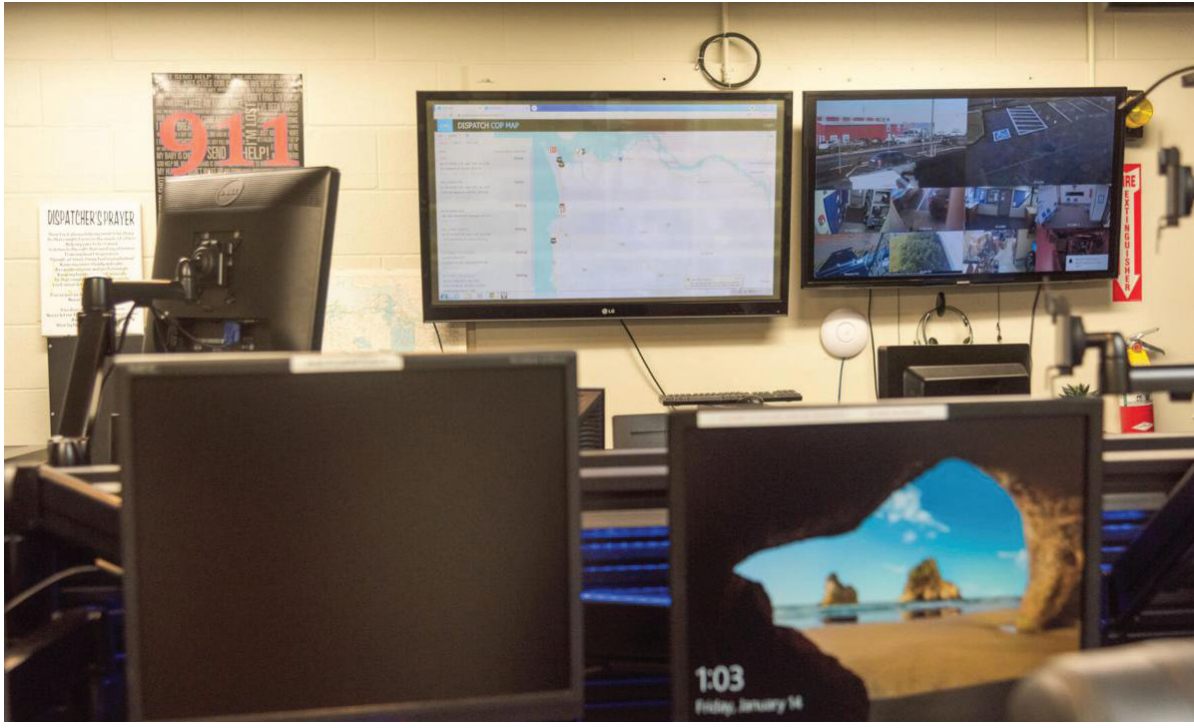
"The radio network needs to be fully linked and interoperable," the sheriff said. "Since the merger, the cities of Astoria and Seaside have been working diligently to accomplish this. A consolidation would maintain the interoperability and network capability that is difficult to achieve when the system is split in ownership and locations."

'Wake-up call'

Staffing shortages have plagued emergency dispatch centers nationwide.

Astoria has not been immune. Over the past couple of years, the city's dispatch center has been operating with only a handful of dispatchers, requiring staff to work a significant amount of overtime each month.

Astoria dispatch handles emergency calls for 15 agencies, including the Astoria and Warrenton police and fire departments, the sheriff's office and rural fire



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Staffing has been a challenge at the Astoria emergency dispatch center.

districts.

Meanwhile, Seaside dispatch, which handles emergency calls for about half the number of agencies, has found stability in staffing.

Seaside dispatchers started traveling north to help in Astoria, but last fall the cities agreed to integrate Astoria's four dispatchers in Seaside until new hires can be fully trained. With a new emergency communications manager hired in August and three dispatchers in training, Astoria expects to resume normal operations in May.

Under the temporary merger, Seaside went from dispatching for seven agencies in the southern part of the county to handling 911 calls countywide.

The merger, ideally, should have been a flip of the switch. However, the two dispatch centers are not completely interoperable, which revealed many gaps and resulted in frustration.

In Knappa, for example, dispatchers can hear firefighters over the main channel, but firefighters can't hear dispatchers.

To work around the issue, Knappa Fire Chief Kurt Donaldson said his firefighters use radios — and sometimes cellphones — to communicate with dispatchers.

He described the situation as a

"wake-up call."

"I feel terrible for the dispatchers," Donaldson said. "I mean, they're doing great work in a tough situation, and the managers are doing the best that they can do in a tough situation."

But he said the temporary merger has demonstrated why a single countywide 911 dispatch center is best for the county.

While the talks about consolidation continue, Donaldson said fire agencies across the county have used the situation as an opportunity to meet and come up with a standard operating procedure to create more consistency, which he thinks will benefit fire agencies and dispatchers.

At the other end of the county, Cannon Beach Fire Chief Marc Reckmann recounted how a firefighter was in the middle of a medical call asking for more resources when another call interrupted the exchange.

Earlier this month, during a wind storm, he said the fire district lost the ability to communicate with dispatch over the main channel for a few hours.

He fears calls will be missed.

"Those are very critical things that are going to get somebody killed," Reckmann said.

'We lose sleep on this at night'

Discussions about consolidation have occurred at various times over more than 20 years, while Astoria and Seaside have continued to invest in separate equipment and infrastructure.

Astoria dispatch made major upgrades as part of a response to a 2015 study by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The study also recommended consolidation.

Other studies over the years that analyzed emergency dispatch in the county also encouraged consolidation. A single countywide 911 dispatch center could maximize staffing and resources, improve call times and enhance coordination, the studies suggested.

One study in 2008 was initiated after the mayors of Astoria, Seaside, Warrenton, Gearhart and Cannon Beach sent a letter to the county Board of Commissioners to investigate consolidation. The mayors said the time had come to move to a "single, more effective and cost-efficient system."

Leaders at the Astoria Police Department say the temporary merger over the past few months has given the county practical experience in what the move might look like.

"The criticality of this system is not lost on us by any stretch," Astoria Police Chief Geoff Spalding said. "We lose sleep on this at night. This is such an important system — that it works appropriately and accurately."

Spalding said the cities were prepared for some glitches at the start of the temporary merger.

"This was never designed to be a permanent solution," he said. "It doesn't make sense to have everybody work out of Seaside. It's just not a big enough facility."

"We're doing the best we can with all the resources we have," Spalding added. "We feel the frustration. We feel the pain. We feel that also because we're also users of the system. At the end of the day, we want it to be better, we want our subscribers to be happy, but I think we're doing a pretty good job managing a very, very complex technological system."

While Astoria is supportive of moving toward consolidation, Spalding said dispatch staff are the most significant consideration in the process.

"It has to be a very thoughtful process because the main thing we want to make sure of is that we take care of our people both in Seaside and in Astoria," he said.

Dispatchers live in different parts of the county, Spalding said. Where would a single countywide 911 dispatch center be located? Who will be in charge? Those are questions dispatchers are rightfully concerned about during the talks, he said.

Seaside City Manager Mark Winstanley thinks another major question is whether consolidation will save taxpayer money. While he said the dialogue between the cities and county has been positive, he is not sold on the idea.

"The question that's been posed, if nothing else, is could we coordinate the upgrades that will need to be made to the two centers, so that basically if you work in one, you can work in the other," Winstanley said.

"These are things we've had a lot of conversation about. They also lend themselves to consolidating the two dispatch centers," he said. "I think it's good conversation to have."

PUBLIC SAFETY LOG



Jan. 21

7:04 a.m., 300 block S. Edgewood: Suspicious circumstances were reported.

12:13 p.m., The Cove: Caller requests a welfare check on an individual.

12:24 p.m., Dutch Brothers: Animal complaint.

2:22 p.m., Stop & Go: Caller reports theft of gas.

3:18 p.m., Ninth and N. Downing: Dogs at large; owner is contacted and warned.

7:08 p.m., 12th and N. Wahanna: A person is arrested for driving while under the influence of intoxicants.

9:03 p.m., 900 block Avenue S: Caller reports someone throwing eggs at his car. Police are unable to locate likely subjects.

9:03 p.m., 1300 block Broadway: Caller reports their car was egged.

9:14 p.m., 2100 block Fernwood: Caller reports egg throwing.

Jan. 22

2:03 a.m., Stop & Go: Caller reports their phone and their bank card was stolen.

12:13 p.m., 2100 block N. Wahanna: Caller says a tree company is taking down trees where eagles have nested. Police advise no active cutting was occurring and would be in contact with ODFW the following day.

2:51 p.m., Gearhart: A dog found wandering in Gearhart is taken to the Seaside police kennel.

5:37 p.m., The Prom: A mother who reported her child missing reports the child has been found.

Jan. 23

3:44 a.m., The Cove: Police responding to a verbal argument tell the involved parties to keep the noise down.

9:24 a.m., 2300 block S. Roosevelt: Caller requests a guest be trespassed after they threatened her.

1:29 p.m., Eleventh and Necanicum: A caller reports a man chased him after he

tried making a video of the transient camp. Police make contact with the subject who said what happened was only verbal.

4:00 p.m., N. Downing: A taxi driver requests a welfare check for a fare he knows has been sick for a week. Police contact the person who said they didn't need assistance.

5:11 p.m., 1100 N. Roosevelt: Caller reports a woman "nodding off" in front of the CMH urgent care; police contact the woman who is not "nodding off" but was upset about a family matter.

6:10 p.m., 3100 block Sunset Boulevard: A front desk person at the Lanai hotel reported a man and a woman screaming at each other. Police contact the subject at their accommodation; they say there was an argument and it was verbal only. No further action was taken.

Jan. 24

4:27 a.m., Public Parking Garage: A person is arrested on a warrant.

7:54 a.m., Third and Necanicum: Dog found running at large; police catch dog and take it to headquarters; the owner is contacted and purchases a dog license when they come to get their dog.

1:44 p.m., 1700 block Thompson Falls Drive: Caller reports her neighbor has trespassed on to her property and poured concrete in a ditch.

1:46 p.m., Pacific Ridge Elementary School, Spruce Drive: A dog bite is reported.

3:30 p.m., 1700 block Thompson Falls Drive: Caller reports her neighbor is outside on his property yelling at her husband and possibly having a nervous breakdown.

3:52 p.m., 1000 block Beach Drive: Caller reports her friend is behaving strangely and thinks there might be someone in their home. They request a welfare check and a callback.

4:41 p.m., 1800 Spruce Drive: Caller says her son has been staying with a friend and she wants him home.

Jan. 25

2:36 a.m., 200 block First Avenue: Police respond to a reported physical disturbance.

9:37 a.m., 100 block S. Prom: Needles are reported.

1:10 p.m., Vicinity of Dominos on S. Roosevelt: A person is arrested on a warrant.

5:01 p.m., Police headquarters: A found dog is turned in to the police.

Jan. 26

9:53 a.m., 1800 block N. Franklin: A burglary in the past is reported.

10:53 a.m., 900 block S. Holladay: Firefighters respond to the location for reported smoke/gas/chemical odor.

12:04 p.m., Necanicum: A dog wandering at large is reported and then captured.

4:05 p.m., 800 block Necanicum: A woman reports her son is "pushing her around." A case was taken.

7:13 p.m., 800 block Necanicum: A disturbance is reported.

Jan. 27

3:48 p.m., Roosevelt between the Chevron station and Seaside Surf: A disturbance is reported.

10:01 p.m., U.S. Highway 101 near KFC: Caller requests welfare check on a subject in the roadway; the person said they had a disagreement with a motorist. The subject moved along.



Jan. 22

8:10 a.m., 1100 block Broadway: Fire alarm.

9:08 p.m., First and N. Columbia: EMS call; Medix is assisted.

Jan. 24

7:02 p.m., 700 block Avenue Q: A bonfire, possibly out of control, is reported. Firefighters on scene.

9:54 p.m., 1400 block S. Franklin: EMS call.

10:03 p.m., 2100 block Lewis and Clark Road: EMS call.

Jan. 26

12:51 p.m., Beach in front of Aquarium: EMS call.

Jan. 27

8:30 a.m., 1100 block S. Wahanna: An odor of gas/smoke/chemical is reported. Firefighters on scene.

Recent data suggests COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness wanes over time. If it's been more than five months since your last vaccination (or two months since you received the J&J shot), we recommend getting a booster shot. Boosters are free and available at many local pharmacies, as well as the County Public Health Department.

Please help us reduce disease transmission and severity of disease by getting a booster as soon as you can!

