

**MINUTES OF THE
BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE ON OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES
PART II – POLICE AND FIRE DEPARTMENTS**

February 5, 2013

Conference Room A

8:00 a.m.

Members Present: Councilor Brad Lown, Councilor Tony Coviello, City Manager John P. Bohenko, Dana Levenson, Steve Marchand, John Golumb, Chief Stephen DuBois, Chief Christopher LeClaire

Members Absent: Councilor Jack Thorsen, Paul Wentworth

City Staff Present: David Moore, Adam Cannon, Gil Emery, Kelly McGrenaghan

Chairman Lown called the meeting to order at 8:00 a.m.

Police Chief DuBois then proceeded to give a presentation on the history and function of the City's dispatch service. Portsmouth used to have an officer assigned on dispatch. They would stamp call sheets. Fire dispatch was assigned to desk watch for the entire day. In 1990, Article X was added to the City Administrative Code. This addition allowed for the consolidation of emergency, police and fire dispatch services.

In 2001, a study committee was formed to evaluate the future growth of dispatch and to examine the pros and cons of the service and examine the feasibility of a communications center. The study also looked at outsourcing the dispatch service, but decided on the current setup. At the time over \$1 million had been invested in making Portsmouth's dedicated dispatch service work, including a \$50,000 redundant center.

Next, Chief DuBois gave a summary of call volume. A six-year average showed that there are approximately 43,000 calls a year. 85% of these calls are for Police, 14% of the calls are for Fire and 1% of the calls are for Public Works (which maintains its own dedicated dispatch service during its business hours). The Chief then stated that there are 30,000 emergency calls annually.

Following this discussion, Chief DuBois then spoke about Rockingham County's dispatch service. Chief DuBois noted that 12 cities, including Portsmouth do their own dispatch service. The county service received around 110,000 calls in 2012. Seabrook, Derry, Kittery, Dover and Rochester perform their own dispatch services. The number of dispatch calls to the county increased by about 10,000 per year.

City Manager Bohenko then stated that towns actually getting dispatch from the county do not have to pay additional fees. Chief DuBois then noted that they looked at a fee system for the county based on call volume. City Manager Bohenko then added that the City is the largest contributor of county taxes and is subsidizing towns for dispatch services. He also stated that the City should move more quickly to charge other towns because Portsmouth is paying for dispatch.

Chief DuBois then continued the presentation by outlining the many responsibilities of the City's dispatch service. The dispatch team observes cell blocks, monitors City Hall panic buttons, CCTV cameras, fire alarms, card access and becomes the Public Works dispatch during storms and after hours. The team enters data for tickets, warnings, complaints and trespass notices. They perform audits of warrants and domestic violence orders. Additionally, they maintain the business contacts for the Police department and monitor parking garage security. Portsmouth dispatch also handles the reverse 911 system and mans the front window of the station when other officers are tied up with situations. He also stated that their familiarity with the City, local landmarks and individuals who repeatedly come into contact with City services give the dispatch service a "home-field" advantage compared to the County dispatch service.

Fire Chief LeClaire added that 80% of all calls are dispatched by Rockingham County. What this means is that the high volume of calls can drown out the Fire Department's specific needs. The City chose to use their own frequency to aid firefighter safety. He also stated that if Portsmouth were to jump into the county service, sheriffs will say that there will be more dispatchers needed to handle the volume of calls. He also noted that Portsmouth's dispatch service is trained, proficient and of a high caliber.

Mr. Marchand then asked if Portsmouth's call percentage is similar to the county level. Chief LeClaire replied that there are a tremendous amount of towns on this side of the county. No specific town receives priority and many

towns do 300 to 400 runs a year. The county dispatch service balks at adding Portsmouth's call volume.

City Manager Bohenko mentioned that ambulance services are working well due to economies of scale. He also stated that there needs to be a conversation as it relates to costs as the City is subsidizing the county. He asked hypothetically whether Portsmouth should be charging a fee out of a fairness perspective. Councilor Coviello stated that that more localized a service is, the better the service will be. He also noted that specialized services come at a cost and that there's always a tug-of-war between cost and service quality.

Councilor Lown asked about dispatch costs and Chief DuBois responded that there are \$800,000 in operations costs. Councilor Lown then asked about the call process. Chief LeClaire replied that each station hears from dispatch when a call is received. The station then signs on to go to the call and give a report over the radio.

Next, Chief LeClaire illustrated how the alarm process works. With each subsequent alarm level (2-alarm, 3-alarm, 4-alarm, 5-alarm), more towns are solicited for assistance in order to handle other calls. Councilor Lown then asked if Portsmouth could go on the radio if the county handled the dispatch service. Chief LeClaire replied stating that when you have that much radio traffic, calls could be missed. He then stated that the radio traffic is a nightmarish, chaotic, and confusing problem that Portsmouth doesn't have and that he doesn't want. He then added that it is the reason why Portsmouth has its own frequency where dispatch and police can know what's being done.

Councilor Lown also asked what frequency is used by the mutual aid towns. Chief LeClaire stated that they are on the seacoast channel and they have to switch over to the Portsmouth channel to let them know if they are coming. Chief DuBois noted that if there is a major fire incident, police may need to block the streets and direct communications back and forth.

Councilor Coviello asked who is telling dispatch to send an ambulance to different stations. Ms. McGrenaghan stated that dispatchers are trained and that it's a lot of organized chaos. The training has led them to be able to coordinate multiple issues at the same time.

Mr. Marchand stated that some smaller towns felt that bringing dispatch to the local level increases the quality, but that each town has to make its own decision about the worth of the service. He then asked if there are other towns than the 12 to see if there is a return on investment and inquired about the pricetag of the county service. City Manager Bohenko stated that the City's dispatch is state-of-the-art and has highly trained people.

Commissioner Golumb stated that there were a lot of good questions raised at the meeting and that adding 40% more to Rockingham County won't benefit us right now. He then asked if there were any efforts to secure more revenue from the state by talking to Senator Stiles and perhaps discussing rooms and meals revenue. City Manager Bohenko noted that the county is governed by the house side of the legislature and that the first step would be to talk to the county commissioners.

Following this discussion, the Committee set the next meeting date for Friday, March 8th, 2013 at 8:00 a.m. The meeting will be in Conference Room A at City Hall and there will be a presentation of the Police Study.

The meeting adjourned at 9:01 a.m. and following the adjournment the Committee toured the dispatch center within the police station.

Respectfully submitted,
Adam Cannon
Special Projects Manager