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JOINT COMMUNICATIONS DISPATCH CENTER

INTRODUCTION

An efficient communications system is vital for public safety. 9-1-1 dispatch has a direct effect on response time which is critical in life and death situations.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

Fresno County utilizes several different but parallel systems of communication and dispatch between first responders. An integrated dispatch center would alleviate duplication of services and shorten response times. According to a high ranking County official, "…two deaths in law enforcement have occurred as a direct result of the lack of a coordinated consolidated communications system".

BACKGROUND

The City Committee of the 2005-2006 Fresno County Grand Jury investigated the emergency communications aspect of the consolidation issue between the County and City of Fresno. For the purpose of this report, the committee only investigated the need for a Joint Communications Dispatch Center.

Dating back to the 1970's there have been innumerable discussions and promises to do something about integrating services provided by the County and City to their respective citizenry. Issues of money, location, or unwillingness of elected and appointed officials to give up turf have impeded any progress toward consolidating services. Regarding the matter of emergency communications, the list is long and well intended resulting in nothing of substance.

- In 1986-1987, the Fresno County Grand Jury investigated the need for a joint public safety building. Included in the responses to the report were comments from Sheriff Magarian acknowledging a future trend to include communications.

- The Little Hoover Commission Report adopted in March 1992, recommended consolidation of emergency services.

- The 2025 Fresno General Plan dated November 2002, adopted the following:

    - Police Services: E-24-e. Policy: Maximize coordination between the Police Department and the Sheriff's Department…and

continue to explore opportunities for combining and consolidating services when it provides a means to improve the level of law enforcement provided to the community.

- o Fire Services: E-25. Objective: Ensure that fire protection, emergency medical and all emergency services are provided in an adequate, efficient and cost effective manner.
  - E-26-b. Policy: Provide for an average response time of not more than five minutes for all emergency requests for service within the metropolitan area.

- The RRM Design Group, hired by the Fresno City Council, developed and prepared a needs assessment for the City of Fresno in March 2006. This report showed a 61,000 sq. ft. communications building located within a larger complex.

- The Fresno City Council and the Board of Supervisors have each had separate committee meetings regarding the consolidation of communications, to no avail.

In January 2006, The Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce hired a consulting firm, Management Partners, Inc., to review and recommend procedures for integrating the public safety departments of Fresno City and County. The report was submitted in May 2006.

- The Chamber's Public Safety Integration Committee said this project is a major undertaking, which has the potential to save significant tax dollars by eliminating duplication and improving services within the Greater Fresno Area.

- The Chamber of Commerce has offered to assume the role of facilitator regarding the process of integrating public safety services. The report established timelines for both parties to commit to planning and meeting before the end of the year.

The consolidation of public safety services has been accomplished in several large metropolitan areas throughout the country.

Integration of like communication services is feasible if the Fresno City Council and the Board of Supervisors would just walk across the street and seriously talk to each other.

- The location of a Joint Communications Dispatch Center should not be based on power, control or turf. The needs and best interests of the citizens of the County should be paramount.

- The various "discussion" phases of the past thirty years must come to an end. Now is the time for action.

DEFINITIONS

The following terminologies are used throughout this report:

- Consolidation – the merger of two or more entities
- Co-location – to place together; arrange side by side
- Integrate – to make into a whole by bringing all parts together; unify
- Interoperability – the ability of any public safety official to talk to whomever they need to, whenever they need to, when properly authorized

RESOURCES

- Interviews:
  - Current and former Fresno County and City officials
  - Fresno County Board of Supervisors and Fresno City Council
  - Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce
  - Members of the media

- Tours:
  - Fresno County Sheriff's Dispatch Center
  - Fresno Police Department Dispatch Center
  - American Ambulance Dispatch Center

- Research:
  - Prior Fresno County Grand Jury Reports
  - Little Hoover Commission Report, March 1992
  - The 2025 Fresno General Plan adopted February 2002
  - Fresno City Needs Assessment Report, March 2006
  - The Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce Report produced by Management Partners, Inc., May 2006
  - Correspondence with County and City officials
  - Newspaper articles
  - Internet

FINDINGS

F1 The functions of dispatching public safety employees and emergency services are basically the same at each dispatch center.

F2 The Fresno County Sheriff, Fresno Police Department and American Ambulance have separate dispatch centers handling similar emergencies.

- Fresno County Sheriff:
  - Receives 9-1-1 emergency calls originating within Fresno County
  - Dispatches County fire calls to the California Department of Forestry (CDF)
  - Dispatches County ambulance calls to CDF per existing protocol.

- Fresno Police Department:
  - Receives 9-1-1 emergency calls originating within Fresno City
  - Dispatches City fire calls to American Ambulance
  - Dispatches City ambulance calls to American Ambulance

- American Ambulance:
  - Dispatches Fresno City Fire Department
  - Dispatches ambulance service within Fresno City in addition to Fresno, Madera and Tulare Counties
  - American Ambulance has a contract with Fresno County for Emergency Medical Services (EMS).

F3 Existing dispatch centers use their own range of radio frequencies.

- The City and County dispatchers and first responders are unable to communicate with each other except by land line phones.

- Response time to County islands is often delayed when no mutual aid agreement exists.

F4 The lack of radio interoperability hinders communication between agencies.

- Homeland Security is concerned with first responders' inability to communicate with multiple emergency agencies nationwide.

F5 At the Fresno Police dispatch, instances have occurred where there are not enough "lines" available to handle the 9-1-1 calls, and they must be queued while waiting for a dispatcher to answer.

- Callers could, in a worst case scenario, receive a busy signal and have to place another call.
- For the Sheriff's dispatch, volume is less and busy signals do not occur.

F6 The Fresno Police Department is scheduled to accept all cellular 9-1-1 calls originating within the city limits sometime in 2006.

- These calls are anticipated to increase call volume by 10 to 40 percent.
- Space, additional staffing, as well as equipment will be a problem in the current location.
- The State recommends that all calls be relayed within 10 seconds.
- During peak hours, the City's dispatch can take up to 20 seconds per call.
  - Cellular volume has not been factored into this response time

- The national standard is to have 95 percent of all calls be successfully transferred to the responding agency within 10 seconds.

F7 The City and County agencies involved agree on the need and feasibility for a centralized dispatch center.
- There is no written agreement between the City and County for the consolidation of the dispatch centers.
- Location is the major disagreement between the City and County.

F8 In March 2006, a needs assessment was completed by the RRM Design Group for the City; the County reviewed the report.

F9 The Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce hired Management Partners, Inc. to review public safety services and make recommendations for improvement.
- The first phase of the report was completed in May 2006.
  - Dispatch Services is one of ten sections in the report.

CONCLUSIONS

C1 Integration of emergency services in Fresno County would improve services and be cost-effective.

- Integration will improve response time.

C2 The Fresno City Council and the Fresno County Board of Supervisors have failed to devise or agree upon a consolidation plan.

C3 The procedures and timelines proposed by the Chamber's report are viable and necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1 Build a regional communications facility for the purpose of integrating all Fresno County and City 9-1-1 dispatchers with interoperability as the ultimate goal.

- Co-location may be the first step toward integration.

R2 The recommendations in the report by Management Partners, Inc. must be followed.

COMMENDATIONS

The Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce is to be commended for taking on the roll of an unbiased third party willing to facilitate discussions and negotiations between the County and City of Fresno to integrate emergency dispatch services.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933.05, the Fresno County Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

Fresno County Board of Supervisors: R1 and R2
Fresno City Council: R1 and R2

Please be reminded that the responses from elected officials are due within 60 days of the receipt of this report and 90 days for others.