



TOWN OF SOUTHBOROUGH

FIRE AND POLICE DEPARTMENTS



RE: Letter to the Residents of Southborough - Regional Emergency Communications Center Initiative

FROM: Fire Chief Steven Achilles and Police Chief Ryan Newell

March 20, 2023

This letter summarizes the timeline of the Regional Emergency Communication Center ("RECC") which was initiated by the Fire and Police Chiefs in consultation with the Select Board as outlined below. It is important to note that at each step, the Fire and Police Chiefs were in agreement on advancing to the next stage of research and presented that recommendation to the Select Board.

On June 29, 2021, a 911 regional conference was hosted by the Office of Public Safety and Security and the State 911 Department in Westborough.

The Lt. Governor, Secretary of Public Safety and Security, State Executive Director of 911, members of State 911 Department, State legislators and public safety officials discussed the future of 911 Emergency Response in MA, specifically regionalization.

On August 17, 2021, Police Chief Paulhus and Fire Chief Achilles provided an update on public safety communications to the Select Board. Both emphasized strengthening the Emergency Communications Center (ECC), specifically improving operations and administration. This would require an assessment of best practices and standards for each agency, as well as future staffing, capabilities, capital expenses and overall operations. Both sought and received support from the Board to explore regionalization of dispatch.

In September 2021, the City of Marlborough and the Towns of Grafton, Hopkinton, Hudson, Northborough, Southborough, and Westborough requested the State 911 Department to conduct a Study of the Feasibility of establishing a RECC for all of the communities. During the next eleven months, departments were evaluated with respective department heads being interviewed to gather information about the current status and future communication needs of each departments.

In November 2021, Chief Paulhus went to the Select Board to request a fifth full-time dispatcher due to the challenges to staff the operations twenty-four hours a day - seven days a week. After much discussion, a fifth dispatch position was approved at the Annual Town Meeting for a start date of July 1, 2022. Since the addition of this fifth dispatcher, Southborough has struggled to maintain a full-time roster of five, despite having the available funding.

In early August 2022, a feasibility study was completed and included the recommendation that the seven communities are suited quite well to establish a RECC or join a state 911 operated RECC.

On August 17, 2022, all seven communities' representatives met to review and discuss each community's position on the two recommendations presented in the study:

1. Regionalize Into State 911 Department Wireless / RECC located within region.
2. Regionalize into a site within region.

After discussion and deliberation, it was evident that Southborough, Hopkinton, Westborough, and Grafton were interested in moving forward with a RECC within either Westborough or Hopkinton. The remaining three communities could not formally commit or were hesitant.

Shortly after the August 17, 2022 meeting, both the initial study and addendum (represented the four towns) were shared with the Select Board.

Chief Achilles and Acting Chief Newell met with Select Board on September 20, 2022, and provided overview and support for RECC to include the application of appropriate grants in collaboration with the other three communities.

On November 16, 2022, the Select Board held an Informational Session on Regional Dispatch. Fire Chief Achilles presented the following:

1. Have Joseph Crean, State 911 Director of Special Projects, review state's general philosophy the future of RECCs and the grant programs available.
2. Discuss options of public business and emergency access at the PSB.
3. Answer any specific questions from members of the Select Board or the public.
4. Request the Select Board to establish a formal position on moving forward.
5. Seek support to enter an Inter Municipal Agreement with the 3 towns to move forward with grant applications that open in January 2023.

Fire Chief Achilles, along with Acting Police Chief Newell, provided the following core philosophies driving the initiative to improve the Town's Emergency Communications Center. This could be accomplished through appropriately staffing and funding current operations or by collaborating with other towns through a RECC:

- Ensure timely and accurate assistance to public, including pre-arrival medical instruction, without interruption, during 911 calls.
- Provide appropriate, predictable, and sustainable staffing to national (NFPA) standards.
- Improve call processing and unit notification times to best practices and national (NFPA) standards.
- Provide dedicated emergency communications to responding personnel, ensuring critical information is transmitted and received.
- Reduce errors and omissions that occur during multiple or critical incidents.
- Provide resiliency and reserve capacity for complex and simultaneous incidents.
- Reduce delays in receiving additional resources.
- Maintain a quality assurance program to improve operations.
- Provide dedicated, credentialled, and experienced oversight.

Additional reference information was provided:

- Number of Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) and Regional Centers in MA:
 - 351 Towns / Cities

- Currently there are 31 Regional PSAPS or RECCs operating in the Commonwealth, with two that are currently in development and slated to begin operations in 2024/2025. There are 240 PSAPs operating in the Commonwealth, with two slated to join an existing RECC in 2023.
- Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) including 560 CMR
 - Requires Certified EM Dispatchers – obtain and maintain, including CPR
 - Required Emergency Medical Director
 - Quality assurance case review process
- National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standards – 1221:Standard on Emergency Communications
 - Minimum Staffing:2
 - Management: 1 Supervisor (within PSAP)
 - Operations: Call Answering: 15-20 seconds, Alarm processing of high priority: 60 sec.
 - Monthly evaluation and review
- Current staffing and stability (Chief Newell)
- Service Level Benefits
- Capital and re-current operational cost benefits

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Select Board decided to continue to have conversations around regionalization along with Grafton, Hopkinton, and Westborough.

The Town Managers/Administrators and Select Board Chairs from all 4 towns met on December 6, 2022, to discuss pursuing regionalization. Grafton, Westborough, and Southborough remained interested while Hopkinton was still exploring the opportunity. Collectively, the group agreed that an Intermunicipal Agreement (IMA) was the best route to go versus the expression of interest given the advantage in the grant process. There was discussion that the current dispatch staffing is insufficient, something needs to be done, and there needs to be financial considerations included. The Southborough Select Board voted to continue to work with the other towns on developing an IMA and assigned Chelsea Malinowski to represent Southborough. The board also discussed the need to come up with options to not have a “dark station”.

On January 17, 2023, a First Draft of the IMA was presented to the Southborough Select Board and feedback solicited. The Board requested that Town Council review the document from a legal perspective. There was discussion around how funds would be approved, communication between the Executive Director and Select Board/Town, grant timing, etc.

Throughout the remainder of January, the four (4) towns continued to work through updates after Southborough’s Town Council provided feedback based on state statute and other successful RECC’s. Select Board Member Chelsea Malinowski stated she would provide an updated version of the IMA and a tracked changes version to the board for further review. Town Council was scheduled to attend the board’s meeting on February 7 to answer questions.

Town Counsel attended the Select Board meeting on February 7, 2023. The main changes to the IMA were: reducing the time to terminate participation in the RECC from five years to nine months (final document is six months), allowing Southborough to have the Select Board control representation on the

Board of Directors, added in operation procedures sections, and updated financial obligations to align with state statute.

In mid-February the Select Board made minor changes to the IMA and with a four to one vote, approved it. They acknowledged there were still questions that needed to be answered: lease agreement, inclusion of indemnification clause, dark station options, and a request to get more information on the proposed site.

On March 2, 2023, a meeting was held with EPA, DEP, and the LSP along with representatives from each town. The EPA representative confirmed that the five-year reports will continue in perpetuity including testing of the site. The contaminant is heavier than ground water and is 100-130 feet below the ground. The cleanup that has been done is for human use and not just ecological purposes.

At the March 7, 2023 Select Board meeting, given questions about the authority of town meeting on this matter moving forward, members discussed the costs associated with continuing dispatch in-house, doubling current staffing, and moving forward with a RECC.

As of this date, both Chiefs continue to strongly support the transition to a Regional Emergency Communications Center. The foundation of this support is predicated on strengthening the delivery of public safety services, while at the same time providing for the safety of our police officers and firefighters. Emergency communications is essential to the operations of both departments. It is our belief that partnering with other communities into a single Regional Emergency Communications Center will ensure predictable and stable services to our community and the region for the foreseeable future.

Ryan Newell, Police Chief

Steven Achilles, Fire Chief