

Public Safety Dispatch Information
Mayor Joseph Maturo, Jr.
For Presentation to the Town Council – 8/5/2014

1. Introduction

Good evening Town Council members. I am here tonight to speak on the merits of the proposed “Public Safety Dispatch Center Upgrade” and to urge you to authorize the funding to complete this vitally important project.

Before I begin, I would just to recognize a group of individuals who have worked incredibly hard on the proposed dispatch center upgrade including Fire Chief Doug Jackson, Assistant Fire Chief Chuck Licata, Police Chief Brent Larrabee, Deputy Chief Ed Lennon, my Director of Administration and Management Frank GentileSCO, my Finance Director Paul Rizza, and Labor Attorney for the Town – Frank Kolb.

Let me first begin by saying that public safety is an issue of paramount importance to me. As a 19 year career firefighter, I am personally aware of the immense benefits of having an efficient, well-equipped public safety program.

And while I am incredibly proud of my fiscal record as Mayor of East Haven, I consider the institution of 24/7 paramedic support back in 2005 to be one of my administration’s greatest achievements principally because it began saving lives immediately on the day it was put in place.

I cannot stress to you enough that this “Dispatch Center Upgrade” is likely to be the most important and necessary capital improvement to our public

safety program that we will make in the next 10 to 20 years. In many respects, it is an upgrade that, due to fiscal constraints, is long-overdue.

For quite some time now, the Fire Department has utilized civilian dispatchers. Despite limited resources and out-dated equipment, civilian dispatching has been tremendously successful in our Fire Department. As a result, in contract negotiations eight years ago, my team and I negotiated with our Town's Police Union for the right to switch to civilian police dispatchers. That right was contingent on the Town negotiating the impact of such a switch. To-date, the Town has negotiated that impact and, regardless of the result of those negotiations, we have paved the way to undertake this incredibly exciting project.

2. The Need for this Upgrade and the Current Dispatch Operation

To understand the necessity of this upgrade, I want to speak briefly about the setup and operations of the present emergency dispatch center.

The current emergency dispatch center, located in Fire Headquarters, is housed in a 5 x 9 room – a 45 square foot room. To put that in perspective, the average prison cell in the United States is 6 x 8 – or 48 square feet (3 square feet larger).

That room, which was originally used to store fuel drums, houses all of the dispatch equipment and includes a tiny bathroom. The room barely accommodates one dispatcher and almost certainly could never accommodate two or more.

The current dispatch center is staffed by four dispatchers – who work alone on each shift. These four dispatchers field approximately 14,000 911 calls each year, along with another 20,000 routine calls. In fact, unless a resident calls the police department directly, all police-related 911 calls are first answered by a dispatcher and then transferred to the police department.

The equipment currently used by our Dispatch team was obtained in 1993 from CMED in New Haven. At the time, CMED was THROWING THE SYSTEM away and East Haven opted to take it. As a result, East Haven has not upgraded its 911 computer system in over 21 years. The system constantly fails and requires servicing. However, due to its age, it has become nearly impossible to obtain replacement parts. The problem with the computer system is augmented by the age of our fire radios, which are also outdated and consistently in need of repair.

Similarly, the radios utilized by our Police Department are significantly outdated and constantly malfunctioning. This proposed upgrade will provide for new police and fire radios, allowing for more effective, efficient communication among our emergency personnel.

As you can plainly see, the present 911 dispatch facility borders on unsafe. Further, the technology utilized in that facility and by both departments is clearly out-dated and deficient.

To make matters worse, our dispatchers work alone – with no coverage or breaks. If a call happens to come in when a Dispatcher is in the bathroom,

he or she must leave the bathroom to answer the call. Dispatchers eat lunch at their desks and have virtually no opportunity to enjoy even modest breaks. If an accident is reported by 5 or 10 people (as is often the case with fires or car accidents), the sole dispatcher on duty is responsible for fielding and screening all 5 or 10 calls simultaneously to rank and address the nature of the emergencies being reported. If the emergencies require fire or police assistance, dispatchers must send the appropriate personnel – all alone, with no support or backup.

To put it in perspective, we are the 40th busiest dispatch center in the State and we are the ONLY one to use one dispatcher to handle volume of calls we receive.

3. What a New Dispatch Center Would Look Like

It should be painfully obvious that our 911 Dispatch Operation, both from a personnel and technology perspective, is in dire need of an overhaul.

Both my Fire and Police Administrators have indicated to me that Civilian dispatch has quickly become the industry standard and has operated successfully in all major cities for many years. In fact, the majority of cities and towns in Connecticut operate a civilian dispatch, with the exception of Milford and Darien – both of which are in the process of implementing civilianized dispatch as we speak.

Looking ahead to the proposed upgrade, the new dispatch center will always have at least two dispatchers working. On nearly 70% of the shifts, a third “Lead” dispatcher will supplement the two standard dispatchers.

The operation of the center with two and three dispatchers, as opposed to one, immediately makes the center capable of handling calls more efficiently and provides a more humane and professional workplace for our Dispatch team.

The new center, which is nearly 10 times as large as the present center, includes ample room to operate.

With the approval of this funding tonight, Dispatchers will be utilizing some of the newest computer technology and radios to respond to emergency calls. The new equipment comes with a warranty and parts to replace the new systems are easily obtainable. The installation of these new computers greatly reduces the likely risk that our current system will suffer a catastrophic failure in the near future.

Further, because dispatchers will now be working in teams, they will be able to take appropriate lunches and rest breaks, which will help them stay more alert.

4. How does this upgrade benefit the FD and PD?

As you can see, the new dispatch center will be optimized to be a technologically efficient and professional work environment.

However, there are measurable benefits to be gained by the Fire Department, Police Department, and the entire Town through the upgrade of our Dispatch center.

The Fire Department

The Fire Chief has stated that the drawbacks of the current dispatch system can best be seen when a call comes in that requires fire, medical, and police response. In those instances, a single dispatcher is responsible for notifying and sending appropriate fire, medical, and police personnel. At the same time, the dispatcher must often field communications among the personnel that are being dispatched. Further, the dispatcher must field duplicate calls regarding the same incident while appropriate emergency response personnel are in the process of responding. This is an incredible amount of work for one person to do – especially in a high-pressure situation.

Under the new system, multiple dispatchers will be able to work together to address complex calls. The use of multiple dispatchers will greatly reduce confusion and will absolutely help decrease response times.

Additionally, as I indicated previously, under the current system, 911 calls for police matters are fielded by the Fire Dispatch Center and forwarded to the police department. Having one, centralized dispatch saves residents time in critical police emergencies because they will no longer have to be transferred from the fire department to the police department to report an emergency. In an emergency, seconds can be precious and eliminating this redundancy will also increase our response times.

The Police Department

a. Another Cop Available per Shift

Perhaps most importantly, the new dispatch program will allow the Town to immediately put another police officer on EVERY shift – increasing the police presence on every shift by 20-25%, depending on the shift. Essentially, since one police officer used to be tied up dispatching every shift, that officer is being replaced with a certified dispatcher and can now be immediately put back on patrol. Additionally, since supervisors currently perform supplemental dispatch work, this upgrade will give police supervisor's discretion to be on the road if a troublesome call comes in. As a result, this upgrade increases both the patrol and the supervisory police presence on our roads. I'll note that increasing supervisors on patrols is a mandate of the Town's consent decree and that this upgrade further helps the Town to substantially comply with its agreement with the Department of Justice.

b. Real dollar savings by using dispatchers

Additionally, when sworn police officers currently perform dispatch duties at the Police Department, they are paid the same hourly wage to dispatch as they are paid to patrol - \$46.00 per hour. On the other hand, under the new dispatch program, dispatchers are paid at a lower rate-of-pay than sworn police officers - \$23.00 per hour.

Over the course of a year, dispatching by a police officer costs \$402,000 dollars. Over the course of the same year, dispatch by a civilian dispatcher costs \$200,000 dollars – and each dispatcher is certified in police, fire, and medical dispatching. As a result, there is a clear cost savings for every hour that a dispatcher works as opposed to a police officer.

In fact, the starting wage of a new police officer in East Haven is approximately \$52,000.00 dollars. Assuming an officer stays in East Haven for his or her entire career (25 years) and never gets a raise, that officer will earn \$1.3 million dollars plus \$500,000 in medical and retirement benefits. In all likelihood, the officer will probably earn over \$3 million dollars in his or her career, including those medical and retirement benefits.

As I indicated, upgrading the dispatch center at a cost of \$1.2 million dollars (bonded over 20 years) will have the same effect as hiring one new officer – it will immediately put an officer on the street.

As a result, we can hire one new officer – which would be a 10 to 25 year commitment and would cost the Town between \$1.8 million and \$3 million dollars, excluding medical and retirement benefits...

OR

We can upgrade our entire Dispatch operation at a cost of \$1.2 million, which will also immediately put another officer on every shift.

Upgrading our dispatch center is clearly the fiscally prudent and safest move for our community.

c. Dispatchers are certified and already undergoing extensive training

Police Officers primary functions are to enforce the law. They do this through patrol and investigation. On the other hands, a dispatcher's primary function is to respond efficiently to emergencies and coordinate emergency resources. Our police officers receive extensive law enforcement training. However, their focus is not on dispatching.

On the other hand, all new dispatchers are receiving extensive professional training, much of which is State-regulated. Also, they are presently shadowing with both the EHPD and EHFD. Additionally, all of them are COLLECT/NCIC certified.

As a result, using civilian dispatchers will allow our officers to better focus on their law enforcement responsibilities rather than worrying about dispatching as well.

5. Conclusion

When you consider the current state of our Dispatch Center and contrast that with the immense fiscal and safety benefits to be gained by making this upgrade, it is clear that this council should unanimously approve the funding to make this necessary public safety improvement. As I stated previously, this upgrade will likely be one of the most important capital improvements to public safety that our community will make in the next decade. It will improve the operational efficiency of our emergency response program, lower response times, lower costs, and increase public safety.

Voting against the funding for this upgrade will put all 30,000 residents of this Town in danger as it will jeopardize the Town's ability to respond to emergencies in the future. Further, even if this upgrade is not approved tonight, this Council can be certain it will be entertaining requests from the police and fire departments for capital upgrades in excess of \$800,000 this year for upgrades to the very radios and computers being upgraded as part of this program.

This upgrade simply consolidates the entire process of upgrading and makes it more efficient.

I urge you all to vote for this necessary funding so we can make this critically necessary upgrade continue to provide top-notch emergency response for our residents.

Thank you.

Legal Explanation of the New Public Safety Dispatch Positions

a. How were the new public safety dispatch positions created?

Chapter 3, Section 5 of the East Haven Town Charter provides that “[t]he Council shall either by resolution or by inclusion in the annual budget, approve the creation of any new job position...”

The 2014-2015 budget ordinance contained an appropriation of \$518,472.00 to cover the creation of the six (6) new public safety dispatch positions. Two (2) public hearings and no less than five (5) public workshops were held regarding that budget ordinance.

As a result, the six (6) new public safety dispatch positions were properly created and funded by the Town Council pursuant to the Town Charter.

b. Who hired the new dispatchers? What was the process?

The Town Charter, insofar as it addresses the Police Department, Police Commission, Fire Department, and Fire Commission is silent on the topic of dispatchers.

Before the institution of civilian dispatching, the Fire Department (via the Fire Commission) hired fire dispatchers and the Police Department (via the Police Commission) hired police officers whose duties, in addition to patrol, included dispatching.

Once the new dispatch positions were created, the Town’s Civil Service Commission properly advertised and conducted competitive testing for the six (6) new dispatcher positions. When the testing was completed, a certified list of those who passed the test was forwarded to Frank Gentilesco – the Director of Administration and Management for personnel matters. Mr. Gentilesco, along with the chiefs and deputy chiefs of the Fire Department and Police Department, interviewed the top applicants. Ultimately, after the conclusion of the interviews, Mr. Gentilesco extended offers of employment to the top six (6) applicants – all of which were accepted.

Pursuant to E.H. Code Section 2-36, “The director of administration and management... shall be the appointing authority and supervisor of... such other positions within the department as may hereafter be authorized.”

Since the Town Council, upon authorization of the new dispatch positions in the budget ordinance, did not designate a hiring and supervisory authority, and since the physical testing and other costs of creating the new dispatching positions were borne by the Administration and Management Department, the positions are deemed to fall under said department until such time as the Town Council designates a permanent hiring and supervisory authority.

As a result, the civil service testing was conducted according the Town’s Civil Service rules. Further, the dispatchers were hired by Mr. Gentilesco on behalf of the Town (pursuant to his authority under E.H. Code §2-36).

c. How is the civilian dispatch program being paid for?

There are two parts to the program: (1) the dispatch employees and (2) the new technology

(1) The Employees

Dispatch employees are being paid out of the new public safety line item in the current budget. (Dept. 01-336 – with a total allocation of \$518,472.00).

Since the Town was already paying for four (4) dispatchers at the Fire Department, this year's budget moved the monies for these six (6) dispatchers from the Fire Department line item to the new Public Safety line item. Further, since the Town was already paying police officers to dispatch at the police department, the Town moved some monies from the Police line item to the new Public Safety line item. As a result, the Town has incurred virtually no additional payroll costs (except benefits) to hiring new dispatchers, especially because the new dispatchers are paid at a lower rate than the police officers.

(2) The Technology

The capital upgrades for the dispatch center, located at the Police Department, are being funded through a \$1.2 million dollar bond. The budget for that bond, which includes allocations for radios, construction costs, and new computers, was reviewed and passed by the Board of the Finance.

Generally Accepted Budgeting Practices allow a Town to incur a capital expense in reasonable anticipation of the approval of bond funds to pay for said expense. As a result, the Town has expended a minimal amount of money (circa \$12,000) to get the project started and has reserved monies in a new bond fund in anticipation that the Town Council will authorize the bonding for this project.

d. What are the future costs of the program?

Once the small bond is paid off, there are no additional costs to the program. The Town will pay the salaries of the dispatchers as it pays all other employees. Further, in relation to the bonding for the new high school (circa \$50 million), this is a VERY modest investment that will immediately make our residents safer and give them a higher quality of emergency service.