

Ashby & Ashburnham Regional Dispatch Study

Objective

The towns of Ashby and Ashburnham are currently exploring the feasibility of a common Regional Dispatch Center supporting Police, Fire, EMS and 911 communications for both towns. A 12 person committee (7 from Ashby and 5 from Ashburnham) has been formed to define the “pros and cons” and to quantify the financial implications of such a move. To date, two meetings have been held and the committee remains in the fact-finding stage. No permanent decision will be made until the process is completed.

Regional Dispatch Background

Although to some this may sound like a “new” concept it is not. Both Ashby and Ashburnham participated in a regional dispatch study in 2010 which also included the communities of Gardner, Templeton/Phillipston, and Winchendon. Note that Templeton and Phillipston are listed as a single community because these two towns have previously regionalized into a single dispatch center located in Templeton. This study concluded that a regional dispatch center would have a lower operating cost than the communities were collectively paying. However, when the regional cost was assessed to each community, some towns would receive a large savings and others would receive a large increase. For example, both Ashby and Ashburnham would save ~\$95,000 per year, but the cost to Winchendon would increase by ~\$84,000. This inequity was largely driven by the cost allocation methodology selected by the study. Based on the results, the regional initiative stalled.

In 2011, after this study was completed, the towns of Lunenburg, Lancaster, Harvard and Devens formed the Nashoba Valley Dispatch Center located at Devens. The Dispatch Center’s cost is allocated equally among the four member communities and each town is expected to save more than \$100,000 per year. This suggests there were flaws in the 2010 study. Once operational, Nashoba Valley expects to add an additional three to four communities, further increasing the savings to each community. The cost of implementing this regional center is being paid by grants from the state and federal government.

Ashby/Ashburnham Regional Initiatives

Recognizing that Ashby and Ashburnham would face significant economic pressure in the foreseeable future, the Boards of Selectmen of the two towns began exploring regional concepts to save money and improve service in February of 2011. The first step was an inter-municipal agreement to share the services of a town administrator. Since Ashburnham had a Town Administrator (TA) and Ashby did not, Mr. Douglas Briggs, Ashburnham’s TA, was appointed to this shared position. The Agreement ensures that each Board of Selectmen retains exclusive control of matters in their own town and provides flexibility for the TA to conduct business for either town, from either town, so that the TA is always available. This arrangement has been in place for over six months and the Boards of Selectmen of both towns are pleased with the results.

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Current Initiative

The Boards of Selectmen asked Mr. Briggs to identify other opportunities for regional savings as they became evident. Because Ashby's Dispatch Center is facing large capital expenses (~\$200,000 per D Briggs on Feb 27, 2012) in the upcoming fiscal year, Mr. Briggs suggested that the two towns explore the merits of a Regional Dispatch Center (RDC) to serve the needs of both towns. Since Ashburnham has a new Public Safety Building with a state-of-the-art dispatch center, and the Ashby Dispatch/Police temporary building requires extensive upgrades, the study presumed that the Ashburnham dispatch center would be used as the RDC. The Boards of Selectmen then appointed a 12 person study committee, 7 from Ashby and 5 from Ashburnham with police, fire and dispatch personnel represented from each town.

First Meeting

The first meeting took place in Ashby on February 8, 2012. The charts developed in the meeting are presented in document titled:

“Dispatch-Study-Charts-Feb-8.pdf”

The chart numbers from that document are cited below.

The committee first brainstormed questions and needs in four topic areas:

- Reasons to Regionalize (Chart 3)
- Barriers to Regionalize (Chart 4)
- Cost/Savings to Quantify (Chart 5)
- Other Questions (Chart 6)

Using a voting technique, the committee then identified the most pressing questions that had to be addressed (Charts 7-10). Tasks to be completed for the second meeting were summarized on Chart 12.

Minutes of the meeting are found in document titled:

“Dispatch-Study-Minutes-Feb-8.pdf”

Meeting with State's 911 Representative

It was confirmed that Grants would pay for the following upgrades in Ashby:

- Upgrading Police dispatch software/hardware
- Secure new fire/EMS department software for record keeping & billing
- Address current “dead spots” in police radio coverage

In addition, the Ashburnham (Regional) Dispatch Center would be upgraded to meet the regional demand. Ashby would receive the lion's share of grant funds totaling perhaps \$300,000. To be eligible for the next round of grants, the application must be submitted by March 16, but a final decision on regionalization can be made by Ashby and Ashburnham as late as April 30.

See Chart 2 below for more detail.

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Second Meeting

The second meeting took place in Ashburnham on February 22, 2012. The charts developed in the meeting are presented in document titled:

“Dispatch-Study-Charts-Feb-22.pdf”

The chart numbers from that document are cited below.

Chart 2 summarizes the results from the above meeting.

Charts 3, 4, and 5 are summaries of agreements that have been used for other regional centers. The Revere/Winthrop Agreement (Chart 5) appeared to be the most equitable among those reviewed. Most importantly, it provided for joint management of the RDC by representatives from both towns.

Chart 6 shows estimated savings from the RDC of between \$150,000 and \$175,000 to be shared between both towns. Following the principles of economy of scale, the cost per capita of a dispatch center should decrease as the population it serves increases. The graph shows that, at a population of 3100 people, Ashby currently has the highest per capita cost for dispatch; with a population of 6100 people, Ashburnham’s cost per capita is lower; and a Regional Dispatch Center serving a combined population of 9200 would have the lowest cost per capita.

Chart 7 explores various cost allocation options with a 50/50 share of the savings appearing to be the most equitable.

Chart 8 summarizes the results of interviews with the TA’s of the towns in the Nashoba Regional Dispatch Center (cited above) to quantify their reasons for regionalizing. At least four additional towns have petitioned Nashoba for entry into their RDC, further increasing their savings.

Chart 9 shows the number of dispatchers per shift for communities of different sizes. The combined population of Ashby and Ashburnham is ~9200 people. Based on the experience of other communities, one dispatcher per shift should be sufficient to meet the need of the RDC. Although not shown on the chart, Winchendon with a population of 10,300 and Templeton/Phillipston with a population of 9,700 each staff their dispatch center with 1 person per shift.

Chart 10 outlines some of the tasks to be completed for the next meeting which is scheduled for March 6, 2012 in Ashby.

Minutes of the meeting are found in document titled:

“Dispatch-Study-Minutes-Feb-22.pdf”

As part of the discussion in the 2nd meeting, the need for a closer look at the staffing of the RDC was identified. The next two days were spent answering that question and the results are presented in document titled:

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“Dispatch-Study-Staffing-Chart-Feb-24.pdf”

Chart numbers from that document are cited below.

All of the data used in this analysis was taken from the 2010 Regional Dispatch Study in which both Ashby and Ashburnham participated.

Chart 2 presents an executive summary of the results of the study.

Chart 3 shows that all towns within the study have approximately the same number of calls per 10,000 people

As expected, Chart 4 shows that the Calls for Service (CFS) volume for Ashburnham and Templeton/Phillipston is similar and not uniform throughout the day. Ashby was not able to present hourly data.

Chart 5 shows the average hourly staffing requirements throughout the day for Ashby and Ashburnham. Since no hourly data was available for Ashby, the Ashby hours were distributed at the average profile of Ashburnham and Templeton (Chart 4). The study in 2010 assumed that, on average, 1 dispatcher can handle 25 minutes of calls per hour. By setting the standard at 25 minutes per hour vs. 60 minutes per hour allows for call volumes above the average. This analysis used the same convention.

Chart 6 shows the combined Call for Service load of Ashby and Ashburnham. It indicates that with 1 dispatcher per shift, the RDC can meet the needs of both towns with ~20% reserve capacity

Estimated Regional Benefits (as of February 24,2012)

If a Regional Dispatch Center is formed, it is anticipated that all of the following hardware and software will be available from a state grant(s).

1. ASHBY POLICE

- Improved radio coverage
 - Two radio voter sites installed in key areas to reduce/eliminate radio dead spots.
- Trittech Software (IMC)
- Law Enforcement Records Management
- Administration (Payroll, Budgeting, Personnel Training)
- Mobile Interface (Laptops)
- Cross Agency Data Sharing
- NCIC/State Interface
- Imaging/Photo
- Vehicle Maintenance
- Personnel Paging
- New Computer Hardware
 - Office Computers (3)

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- Tough Book Lap Tops (4)
 - Printers (?)
 - GPS installed in cruisers w/laptops to be displayed in dispatch center.
2. ASHBY FIRE/EMS
- Improved Radio Coverage
 - Two radio voter sites installed in key areas to reduce/eliminate radio dead spots.
 - Trittech Software (IMC)
 - Fire Records Management
 - Administration (Payroll, Budgeting, Personnel Training)
 - Mobile Interface (Laptops)
 - Fire Attendance Tracking
 - Vehicle Maintenance
 - EMS Billing
 - New Computer Hardware
 - Office Computers (2)
 - Tough Book Lap Tops (4)
 - Printers (?)
 - GPS installed in fire vehicles w/laptops to be displayed in dispatch center.
3. REGIONAL DISPATCH CENTER
- Excellent work environment
 - Updated/New Technology and Equipment
 - Dispatch Personnel Exceed State Training Requirements
 - All Full-Time Dispatchers are State Academy Certified
 - Double Coverage at peak hours and as needed.
4. Ashby Emergency Dispatch Center if an event required it.
- Ashby's current radio system for police/fire/hwy will remain at current location and fully operational from that location if needed.
 - All phone lines (Except E-911) can be left operational in current location if needed.
 - New computer Hardware and IMC Software maintained at current Ashby location.

Third Meeting

The third meeting took place in Ashby on March 6, 2012. The charts developed in the meeting are presented in document titled:

“Dispatch-Study-Charts-March-6.pdf”

The chart numbers from that document are cited below.

Chart 2 summarizes results from State Attorney General's Office stating that this study team is exempt from the state's open meeting laws. It also presents results from an inquiry to State Ethics Commission which confirmed that a single town administrator can

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serve in two towns, but recommended that the town administrator not participate in the discussions on regional dispatch.

Charts 3, 4 & 5 presents a list of hardware/software being requested in the grant along with the beneficiary (Ashby and/or Ashburnham). Chart 5 shows the current value of the grant to be ~\$350,000 with ~80% benefiting Ashby. It was recommended that each town appropriate \$20k in their annual town meeting to cover unknowns.

Charts 6 & 7 shows the Ashby cost required to upgrade the Ashby dispatch center which totals ~\$175,000.

Chart 8 shows that the total costs savings realized in the regional dispatch center are derived from personnel reductions. No decision was reached on how to proceed in this matter.

Chart 9 summarized the “next step” required to support a March 16 grant submittal.

Fourth Meeting

The fourth meeting took place in Ashburnham on March 20, 2012. The charts developed in the meeting are presented in document titled:

“Dispatch-Study-Charts-March-20.pdf”

The chart numbers from that document are cited below.

Chart 2 presents a summary of the grant as submitted. With the concurrence of Ashby, the grant strategy was changed from the immediate formation of a Regional Emergency Communication Center (RECC) to the formation of a Regional Public Safety Answering Point (Regional PSAP) which will transfer to a RECC over time. The following is an excerpt from the grant application.

Avoid Lay-Off of Ashby Dispatchers – *Initially Ashby will retain their dispatcher to continue in their current role with the exception of answering E-9-1-1 calls which will be covered in the regional PSAP by Ashburnham. Both towns will aggressively pursue other employment opportunities within our communities for the dispatchers. Through this process and possibly attrition in either department, we will gradually move in the direction of becoming a full RECC. Because these opportunities could come to fruition relatively quickly, we must be prepared and capable to operate in the capacity of a RECC immediately.*

Since there are no immediate layoffs, in the short term, the costs of this approach is higher than for an RECC, but the cost of lack-of-work benefits are eliminated. From a grant perspective, Ashby is the primary beneficiary with ~\$355,000 worth of benefits vs. ~\$4,000 for Ashburnham.

Chart 3 shows the system architecture for the regional system.

Chart 4 shows the cost responsibilities for each town, the added costs that Ashburnham will incur in the Regional PSAP solution (which Ashby must reimbursement to

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Ashburnham), and the internal added cost to Ashby to maintain their newly acquired hardware and software.

Chart 5 shows the cost savings for each town as Ashby and Ashburnham transition from a Regional PSAP to a full RECC.

Chart 6 shows the steps from receipt of grant through formation of the RECC.

Future

This document will be updated as this committee makes additional progress.