



MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Selectmen
FR: Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager
RE: Inter-municipal Agreement re: Regional Dispatch (Gardner/Athol)
DT: March 3, 2015

Summary of Recommendation

As the Board is aware, discussion between top police and fire officials in both Gardner and Athol have been ongoing for nearly a year to determine if a regional dispatch center would be feasible for the communities. The overriding goals are to:

- ensure and enhance public safety dispatch, and
- achieve short- and long-term cost efficiency and economies of scale.

The proposed Inter-municipal Agreement (IMA) before the Board tonight would advance development of a regional dispatch center that would meet both goals: public safety and cost savings for taxpayers.

Recommendation: The Chief of Police, Fire Chief and Town Manager recommend that the Board of Selectmen approve the IMA so that the process of developing regional dispatch center may continue to advance.

Feasibility Study Findings

On February 16, a copy of the final report by consultant Thomas Kennedy was distributed to the Board. This report outlines the feasibility of establishing a regional dispatch center and provides the framework for the logistics to accomplish same.

The report found that ***“both communities would benefit from a consolidated Emergency Communications Center”*** and that the following objectives can be accomplished:

1. A more robust 911 dispatch center that will have:
 - a) Greater capability for EMD calls
 - b) Greater economy of scale to manage large events
 - c) Ability to take advantage of new technology
 - d) Development of dispatcher proficiency

2. Long term cost savings

- Source: *Feasibility Study for Developing Regional E911 Communications Services for Gardner and Athol Massachusetts. Executive Summary. January 22, 2015.*

It is important to note that this study was completed with substantial input from our public safety chiefs, and through personal interviews of public safety line personnel conducted by Mr. Kennedy.

The consultant – a retired Lt. Col. with the Mass. State Police who oversaw the challenging merger of State, Registry and Transit police agencies – will be available to answer questions related to the 39 page report at the Board’s meeting.

Athol Town Manager’s Rationale

Based upon my work negotiating the terms of the proposed IMA with Gardner’s Mayor, and many in-depth discussions with our public safety chiefs and our regional partners, I am convinced that the Town of Athol should advance development of the regional dispatch proposal through execution of the agreement.

The signed IMA is required for the submission of grant requests for equipment and operations (deadline is end of this month).

While it is fully expected that each community will benefit from both service and cost perspectives over the maximum 25-year term of the agreement, the IMA has a couple of features which would allow termination of the agreement.

First, there is a mutual “escape hatch” in Section 1 if the state does not come through with a sufficient commitment of financial resources to allow this project to have success. Beyond that, each community has a no-fault “opt out” (30 month notice to Athol from Gardner; 18 months from Athol to Gardner) if we are not satisfied with the regional dispatch center.

The benefits to proceeding are many:

- Ability to meet requirements of enhanced 911 and future technology with state grant assistance
- Improved equipment and radio communications
- Shared access to data via fiber connection (redundancy in communications)
- Increased dispatch staffing (from one to three including supervisor)
- Maintaining jobs for existing Athol and Gardner dispatchers (no layoffs)
- Increased wages for dispatchers
- Enhanced training and professional development for dispatchers
- Potential to add additional towns down the road to further reduce costs
- Improved Athol ambulance response rate for 2nd calls
- Avoidance of mandated (and potentially unfunded) switch to regional dispatch down the road

And, of course, there are substantial projected savings to taxpayers through consolidation of four dispatch centers into one state-of-the-art facility.

Based upon the estimated FY17 budget for a regional dispatch center as detailed in the study, the chiefs and I have calculated that Athol will achieve a “net” savings of \$88,000 per year while also improving the level of dispatch service.

This project will not happen overnight.

Should the Board approve the IMA, the city of Gardner will submit a grant to the State 911 Department for sufficient funding to acquire all required equipment and to subsidize initial operations of the regional center.

There will obviously be an ongoing dialogue with staff from each community over the next year to eighteen months to work through the operational details. During that period, Athol public safety staff and supervisors will continue to work with their Gardner counterparts to develop a joint operations manual and procedures for the center.

Looking ahead, the Gardner facility has sufficient space planning to accommodate additional communities for greater economy of scale long-term.

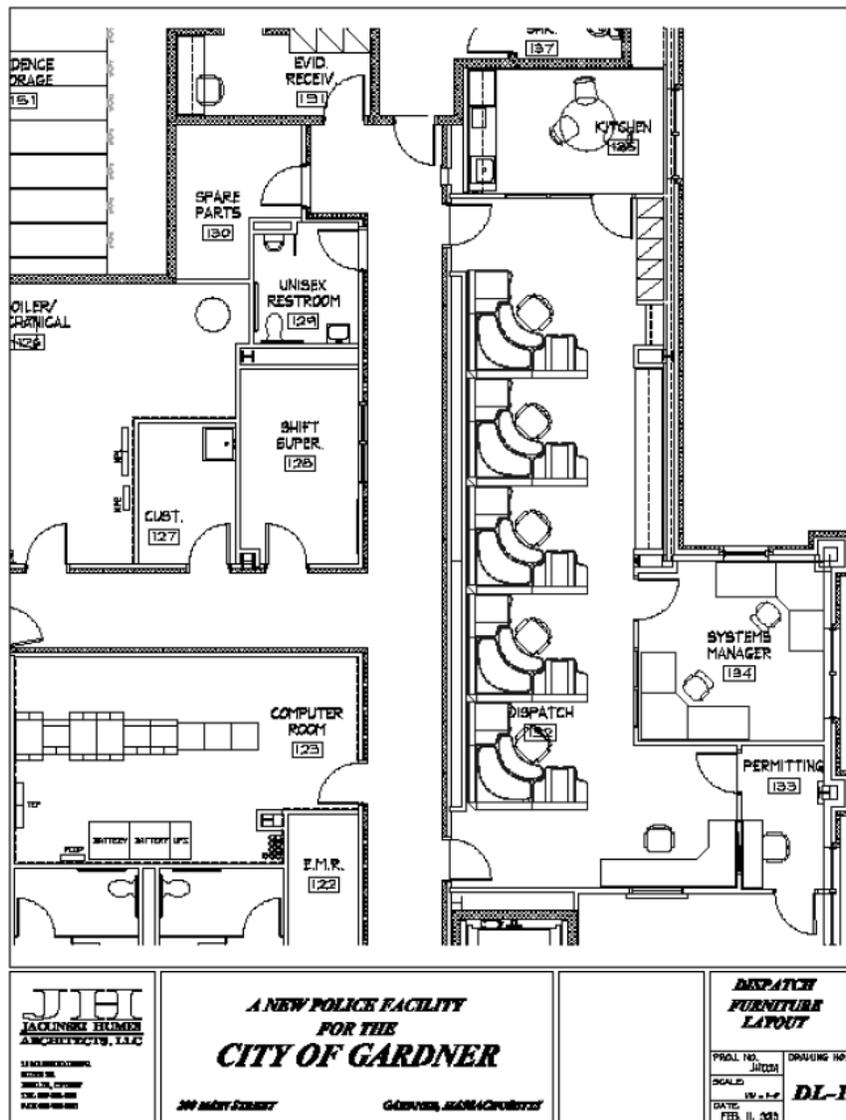


Figure 3 New Gardner 911 Dispatch Center