

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Board of Selectmen  
 FR: Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager  
 RE: Update on Regional Dispatch Services (Gardner/Athol)  
 DT: September 20, 2016

In accordance with the approved Inter-municipal Agreement (IMA) between Athol and Gardner dated March 20, 2015 – recommended by the police chief, fire chief and town manager – local officials have worked in good faith to develop the North Central Regional Emergency Communications Center (NCRECC) that will initially serve Athol and Gardner.

Following a substantial delay in the expected fall 2015 timeline for receipt of grant funds, the process remained in a holding pattern until the spring of 2016 when the state awarded just over one million dollars through a 911 grant. The initial round of new equipment is ready to be delivered and installed at the dispatch center in Gardner within the next month.

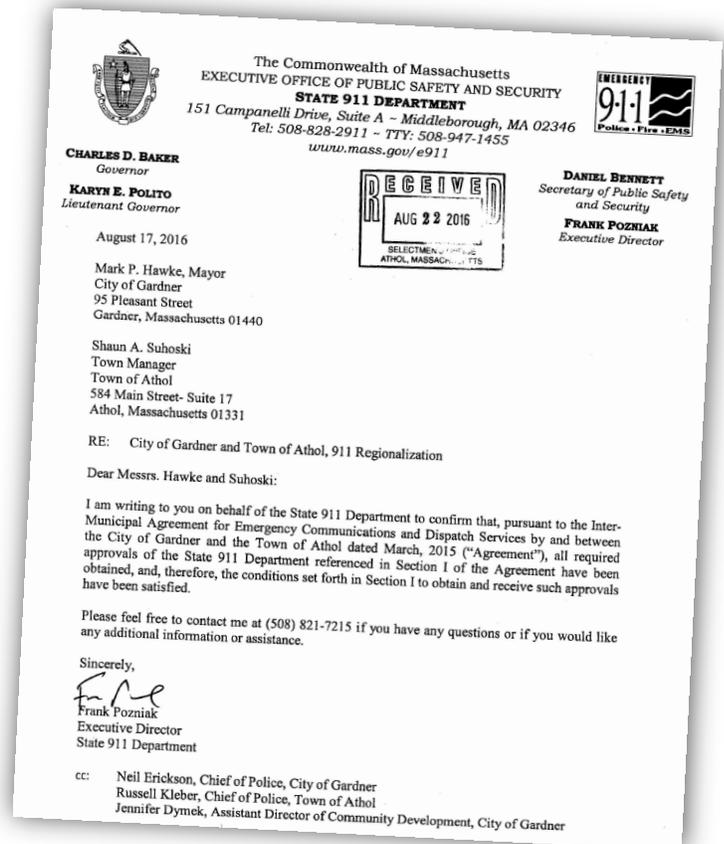
A second grant is pending that would fund security and monitoring upgrades, new telephone systems, and other technology in the Athol police and fire stations as well as the NCRECC.

On August 17 the State 911 Department advised that all required approvals are in place for the Athol-Gardner IMA. I am therefore confident that the NCRECC will receive the additional grant funds needed for equipment and training to make the center fully operational.

**Next Steps – Staff Engagement; Transition Logistics**

Even though the prospect of the NCRECC going “live” is at least another year to 15-months away, given the above progress, it is time to turn our focus to the logistics of transitioning *four* existing dispatch operations – and our impacted employees – into a cohesive unit.

To achieve success, we need to have consistent and open dialogue between management and staff; regular meetings with impacted unions; and good-faith and open discussion



between Athol and Gardner management, dispatchers and the respective unions as there are many legitimate operational details associated with regionalization.

Last week the dispatchers presented me with a list of 'nuts and bolts' questions concerning how regionalization would impact the workplace and/or working conditions of staff. The document is thorough and well-written; and can serve as the framework for our upcoming discussions.

I am committed to working through each of the issues identified by staff to make the transition successful. And, answers to some of the questions will actually be determined by the staff themselves as operational guidelines are developed with our Gardner counterparts.

The three impacted unions (police, fire, TH/dispatch) have been invited and encouraged to participate in every regionalization meeting since May 2016; once the grant contracts were signed and the consultant began to develop the scope of new equipment.

It is clear to me that the concept of regional dispatch services can be successful and result in more first responders on the street more quickly in Athol. However, the employees have raised legitimate questions that must be addressed before any regional platform can go live.

***REQUESTED ACTION: To assist in this process, and to keep the Board of Selectmen more closely apprised of progress, I am requesting that the Board designate one or two selectmen with daytime availability to participate in the dispatch meetings and our local union discussions which will occur over the coming months.***

Note: Project consultant Tom Kennedy, a retired Lt. Col. with the Mass. State Police who oversaw the challenging merger of State, Registry and Transit police agencies, and radio expert Gary Kromack, will both be present on September 20 meeting to answer questions.

Additional Information Sheet Attached:

- Benefits to Regionalization – Town Manager's Recommendation
- Dispatch Status of Regional Communities (graphic)

## Benefits to Regionalization – Town Manager’s Recommendation

Based upon many in-depth discussions with our current and former public safety chiefs, and our regional partners, I remain firmly convinced that the Town of Athol should proceed with regionalizing dispatch services. The benefits are many:

- Savings will allow hiring an additional police officer (needed for narcotics interdiction, investigation and additional patrols, etc.)
- Improved and immediate response by second Athol ambulance (avoids delays of third-party referral; recoup potentially \$40,000 to \$75,000 in lost revenue annually)
- Improved equipment and radio communications (once regionalized, state grant funds can help address “dead spots” or other shortcomings)
- Shared access to data via fiber connection (redundancy in communications)
- Increased dispatch staffing (from one to three including supervisor)
- Maintains jobs for all existing Athol and Gardner dispatchers (no layoffs)
- Enhanced opportunity to advance and equal or better wages for dispatchers (regional model will have “supervisor” level employees and a RECC “director”)
- Ability to meet requirements of enhanced 911 and future technology with state grant assistance
- Potential to add additional towns down the road to further reduce costs (up to five dispatch stations plus supervisor)
- Avoidance of potentially mandated (and potentially unfunded) switch to regional dispatch down the road

Attached to this memorandum is a graphic showing Athol, its abutting communities, and the tertiary (second ring) of area towns (source: Commonwealth of Mass., Executive Office of Public Safety, December 2014).

***Orange, Erving, Wendell, Warwick, Shutesbury, New Salem, Petersham, Hardwick, Barre, Phillipston, Templeton, Hubbardston, Royalston and Winchendon are part of regional dispatch centers.***

Athol and Gardner will form the bookends of a regional center that can grow in economy of scale to include additional Route 2 towns, or, our abutting towns.

The fiber optic link operates at the speed of light, and our backup radio transmitters are only 12 miles apart. The distance between Athol and Gardner’s borders is a scant 6.5 miles to a maximum of 18 miles. Athol itself is 10 miles from its northern to southernmost point.

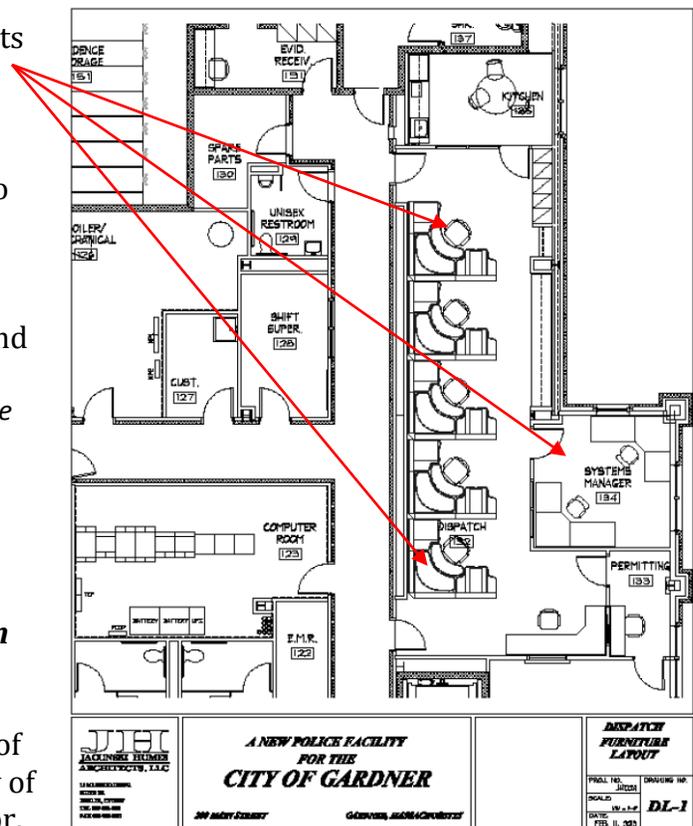
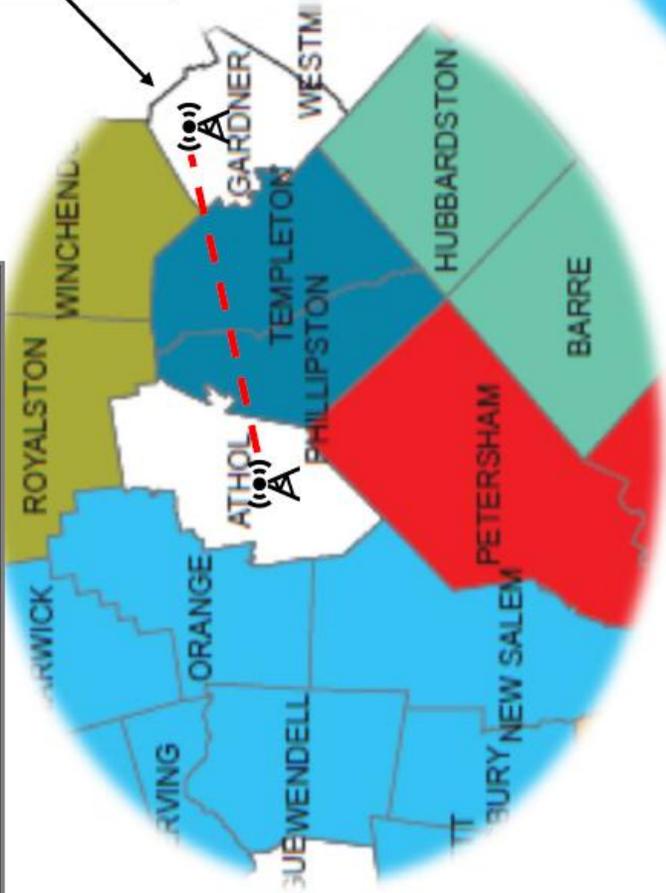


Figure 3 New Gardner 911 Dispatch Center

All communities abutting Athol are part of existing regional emergency communication centers.



Gardner and Athol will have redundant communications via **fiber optic and radio**.  
*(Note: radio towers are only 12.4 miles apart; Orange to Shelburne is 20+/- miles.)*

The Gardner Police Dept. has a modern dispatch center to accommodate up to five dispatchers – plus a supervisor – should the district grow in future years. More communities results in even greater savings

Regional dispatch will allow the Town of Athol to hire a new patrol officer, bringing the police department to 20 sworn officers (one short of the 2012 FWAC recommendation).

Regional dispatch will allow immediate dispatch of Athol's second ambulance; avoiding call backs or costly referrals to third parties.

