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Athol Moves Forward With Regional Dispatch

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ATHOL - The selectboard on Tuesday voted to sign an agreement with the city of Gardner that will allow the two municipalities to move forward with establishing a regional police and fire emergency dispatch center which will be housed in Gardner.

Chairman Stephen Raymond, Selectman Anthony Brighenti and Selectwoman Susannah Whipps Lee voted in favor. Selectman Alan Dodge was not present. Vice Chairman Lee Chauvette recused himself from the discussion and subsequent vote, as one of his sons is a part-time dispatcher in Gardner.

Town Manager Shaun Suhoski said a regional center will provide a cost of savings to the town and provide improved dispatch services. In addition, a full four-man crew per shift at the fire department will be available to respond to calls as a firefighter will not have to be manning the local dispatch desk at the uptown fire station.

It is estimated that Athol will save between \$50,000 and \$70,000 per year in relation to its current yearly dispatch expense. An additional \$20,000 per year will be saved as there will be a reduced need for ambulance EMT and firefighter overtime call-ins, said Suhoski.

Signing of the agreement allows Athol and Gardner to move ahead with seeking grant funds for equipment for a regional center. It is anticipated the center will be operational beginning in the second quarter of fiscal year 2017.

"The estimated FY17 budget would require Athol to contribute \$206,687.18 towards to the regional dispatch," said Suhoski. "We estimated this to be \$92,252.88 less than what Athol would pay for stand-alone dispatch.

"Actual savings will be a bit less due to the police chief's administrative staffing plan for the window to be open from 8 a.m to 8 p.m. daily. Actual savings are estimated to be at least \$50,000 and potentially \$70,000 per year to the town of Athol; firefighter overtime call back will be reduced as the dispatching firefighter will now be able to jump right on ambulance or fire calls."

Police Chief Timothy Anderson explained that plans for the center are still being formulated. He intends to re-staff the full-time administrative assistant's position (8 a.m. to 4 p.m.) and hire two part-time clerks (4 to 8 p.m.) to ensure administrative tasks currently handled by dispatchers continue to be taken care of, and to have someone available for the public between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. During overnight hours, officers will be available, if at the station.

Anderson said Wednesday, that he has proposed housing prisoners at Franklin County House of Correction overnight. However, he said there will be times when prisoners will have to be housed at the station. Cells would be monitored remotely from the regional center, and Anderson has proposed hiring cell monitors. He noted that the department still has to comply with a requirement to physically check on prisoners every 30 minutes. "You can't do that from Gardner," he said. "It's always best to have a body on-site."

On Tuesday, Suhoski said all current dispatchers in Athol will have the option of retaining their positions and moving to the regional center.

Saying that the regional center should provide a 25-year benefit, Suhoski added other positives include:

- a greater capability for EMD calls;
- a greater economy of scale to manage large events;
- the ability to take advantage of new technology;
- ensuring and enhancing public safety dispatch;
- achieving short-term and long-term cost efficiency and economies of scale; and
- the development of dispatcher proficiency.

Other benefits noted, he added, include:

- the 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;
- maintaining jobs for both Athol and Gardner dispatchers, and increased wages for dispatchers;
- enhanced training and professional development for dispatchers;
- the potential to add additional towns down the road to further reduce costs;
- improved ambulance response rate for second calls in Athol;
- the avoidance of a state mandated (and potentially unfunded) switch to a regional dispatch center in the future.

Looking ahead, Suhoski said, "As was discussed at a meeting with dispatch, police and fire personnel last week, there will be an ongoing dialogue with staff from each discipline - including specific meetings with the dispatch (SEIU) union and its attorney - over the next year to 18 months to work through the details. Also, during the next 12 to 18 months, Athol public safety staff and supervisors will work with their Gardner counterparts to develop a joint operations manual and procedures for the regional dispatch."

Gardner Mayor Mark Hawke said that the change to a regional dispatch center is inevitable and that both municipalities are making the right move by moving forward now on their own before being mandated to do so. He said both should also remain open to questions and input regarding the changeover to a regional dispatch center.

Suhoski said opt-out options include grant funding not being received by August 2016 terminating the agreement, Athol being able to end the agreement with an 18-month notice (one fiscal period) to Gardner, and Gardner being able to end the agreement with a 30-month notice (two fiscal periods) to Athol, to allow Athol time to coordinate a reboot and funding of local dispatching services.

Of a regional dispatch center, Acting Fire Chief John Duguay said, "I think the idea of this regional dispatch, if it comes to fruition, is a positive move for the town. The benefit to the fire department is having the ability to free up the firefighter that is presently assigned to desk duty. [as he] will be able to respond to calls. In the case of fires, we will be responding immediately with four firefighters."

Athol narcotics officer Jarret Mousseau commented, "As long as the money saved stays with the police department, we can hire more officers, and our dispatchers can work at the regional dispatch, I think it's worth it. I have much more of a concern regarding all the possible upcoming retirements over the next year or so and the direct impact on manning and the public's safety."

Athol Police Sgt. Christopher Casella said, "I don't really know enough about what is proposed for me to comment. I've seen how Orange does it, but I'm not sure if the Gardner call center is going to be set up and managed the way Shelburne Control is and what the policies of Athol Police Department will be regarding how the station is manned, et cetera. I think Athol is too large to have the station being empty during any time of the day or night. Even if it goes, it would be quite a bit of time before they get it up and running and I'll be retired before then."



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 PO Box 1000
 225 Exchange Street
 Athol, MA 01331
 Phone: (978) 249-3535

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