

Frequently Asked Questions

This document contains a summary of the public meeting comments and answers to the frequently asked questions. Questions asked at multiple public meetings are answered once within this document. Responses to these questions have been provided by the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) 9-1-1 Oversight Committee as well as the GeoComm project team.

Dartmouth Public Meeting

Q. How do ancillary duties get handled?

A. As discussed, each department will need, based on size, to make their own arrangements for the maintenance of these duties. Please refer to section three of the Final Feasibility Report and Implementation Plan for specific recommendations. Some of the duties may be shifted to the day shift when others are available or may require the addition of clerical positions.

Q. How will calls be prioritized?

A. Currently, each station prioritizes responses to incoming calls based upon severity. There will be no change in this process at a Regional Emergency Communications Center (RECC). The prioritization details will be established during the policy and procedure implementation stage and agreed upon by the Public Safety Communications Board (PSCB) which will include public safety officials representing all involved agencies.

Q. Would this be another level of bureaucracy?

A. The proposed administrative agency will have dedicated staff to assist member communities accomplish tasks that current independent dispatch operations are not able to consistently accomplish. Many of these tasks cross town boundary lines and therefore are not easily accomplished by local agencies. The administrative agency is a voluntary association of local agencies and not an additional layer of bureaucracy.

Q. Is it more effective to give funds to towns to provide services?

A. 9-1-1 funds are from fees collected on all individual wired and wireless phone bills. The State 9-1-1 Department is currently allocating these funds to dispatch operations for equipment and training. RECCs receive a higher percentage allocation based upon the number of communities supported. Thus, a RECC supporting ten communities will receive more State 9-1-1 funds than the same ten individual communities operating independently. The Massachusetts State 9-1-1 Department is encouraging regionalization of dispatch facilities and there is concern the state may reduce payments to individual dispatch operations in the future.



Q. Is this foolish to do based on dollars?

A. Since the formation of the regional 9-1-1 Steering Committee its primary goal has been enhancement of public safety services. While anticipated cost savings are a secondary benefit of the recommended action, it is not the driving factor.

Q. Lots of concerns about radio traffic and dispatch! How will this be handled?

A. Regional trunked radio systems work well in much larger communities or regions. This is a proven technology that can be deployed in the region to the benefit of all public safety agencies. With sufficient staffing, training and radio configuration, there should be no issues with the amount of radio traffic. In addition, GeoComm has provided specific radio recommendations in section four of the Final Feasibility Report and Implementation Plan, as well as trunking information, “Trunked Radio A Short Description” Attachment 3 of the same document.

Q. Is this going to be more expensive for the cities?

A. Based on comparison of current operational costs, it appears that it will not cost more for the majority of cities and towns to join the RECC. In the few cases where it may cost more, the increase will be marginal. There will be significant start-up costs that are eligible for grant funding. The benefits to the cities will be overall operational dispatch efficiencies and improved public safety communication with neighboring communities.

It should be noted that many of the municipalities need to make significant facility and technology upgrades if no consolidation occurs. Operating independently, these necessary upgrades would not be eligible for grant funding resulting in additional local costs or continued substandard facilities and technology to support public safety.

Q. How will the wireline fire alarm systems be managed?

A. All alarms that are monitored by agencies moving to the proposed RECC will have to be moved. This task will be easier as more of the alarms are converting to wireless systems. The cost associated with the alarm relocation is eligible for grant funding through the State 9-1-1 Development Grant Program and will be addressed in the detailed Implementation Plan. The disposition of alarm monitoring is a local decision that will be made during the implementation planning process. If it is determined that alarms will terminate in the RECC, there will be an impact on staffing that will need to be evaluated.

Q. Who pays for fire dispatch operations?

A. The state will contribute to the cost of fire dispatch if it is part of a call taking center that has E9-1-1 capabilities. If fire dispatch is separate, as is the case of a few communities, the separate fire operation is not eligible to receive State 9-1-1 funding.



The proposed RECCs would handle the fire calls for service as well as all law enforcement calls for service and thus both services will have the benefit of State 9-1-1 funding.

Q. Will there be issues with not knowing the local area and the concern for officer safety?

A. Although dispatchers/communications personnel would be moved out of their current jurisdictions, they will have improved training and the opportunity to learn the geographical area they are covering. The move to a consolidated dispatch center will not change the local public safety police officers, firefighters, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT's), and supervisors responding to the 9-1-1 and other non-emergency calls. In addition, new CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) technology will include local information that will be entered into the system during the planning stage. It is anticipated that the new RECCs will be managed, supervised and operated by communications personnel currently employed by the individual cities and towns.

Q. How can this provide better service than we do today?

A. The communications personnel through common training and increased uniformity of operations and policies will become more efficient and therefore will be able to provide quicker response times. By combining, each community will have access to more robust resources in the event of a major incident or multiple routine incidents. The combined resources of each RECC offers significantly more depth than the current where so many of the PSAPs are staffed by one person.

Q. Does it seem like there are too many ifs and the report is premature?

A. If taken in context the report was not premature. There were some discrepancies due to a lack of participation by some communities to deliver information needed. Issuing a draft report allows for review and correction to be made and insures that all stakeholders have the opportunity to identify additional concerns for further study. The data included in all draft reports has continued to be revised and refined through the draft review process.

There are a number of technology and policy questions that need to be made by the local public safety agencies as this process moves forward. The report recommends formation of a governance body to facilitate the myriad of local policy decisions that couldn't be determined as part of an initial feasibility study. This study is merely step one of a long, dynamic process to improve public safety throughout the region.

While the report identifies ongoing operational costs as part of the feasibility assessment, there are legitimate concerns about the State 9-1-1 funding regarding start-up costs that will need to be finalized before any community can commit to joining a regional solution. This issue is under discussion with the State 9-1-1 Department.



Norton Public Meeting

Q. Will this work? Massachusetts is unique.

A. Massachusetts is unique which is why a specific local approach to this feasibility study was crucial to its success. While GeoComm has extensive exposure to public safety communications and 9-1-1 systems throughout the country, the feasibility assessment was conducted under local leadership and guidance. Many of the issues and concerns faced by Massachusetts agencies are similar to issues and concerns faced by public safety agencies around the country. The recommendations contained within the feasibility study report are locally developed solutions to improve public safety locally. Most of these improvements can be addressed with organizational changes, technology improvements and enhanced collaboration that collectively offers residents and public safety personnel solution higher level of service while maintaining the local culture that makes Massachusetts unique.

Q. What is GeoComm's experience in these studies and results?

A. GeoComm has been providing consulting services for more than a decade and is an industry leader in providing exceptional public safety communications consulting services. Customers include over 650 different units of city, state, local, and regional governments on projects designed to improve capabilities to prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from public safety emergencies.

Throughout GeoComm's history we have provided public safety services to all levels of public safety agencies across the country. GeoComm has successfully completed hundreds of projects for government agencies including PSAP design planning and consolidation studies, interoperable two-way radio and network communications engineering, NG9-1-1 systems review, planning, design, and implementation, NG9-1-1 GIS data integration, wireless Phase I and Phase II planning, and dispatch mapping consulting.

GeoComm consultants have been involved in the development, design, management, and implementation of both stand-alone and consolidated public safety communications systems over the last 30 years. Our consultants perform PSAP consolidation feasibility studies for clients from small, rural counties up to large regional areas. We assist local governments in evaluating the specific advantages and disadvantages – and developing effective transition plans when the decision is made to consolidate. After recommendations are made, GeoComm continues to assist our clients as an implementation facilitator for those client groups who chose to merge some or all of their operations or PSAP facilities.

In addition, GeoComm is focused on industry standards. Our staff is actively involved and has a long leadership history in industry organizations such as NENA and APCO. GeoComm's staff involvement ensures the integration of the latest tools and knowledge into our development methodology and our approach to a successful project.



Q. What are the savings?

A. All financial details regarding the agencies, recommendations, and potential future 9-1-1 operations are included in section five of the final report. Specifically the operational savings are identified on page 5-19. There are a number of local decisions that must be made before a final, accurate budget can be certified. For example, there are currently multiple collective bargaining agreements that would need to be merged in order to finalize compensation schedules and benefit packages for the RECC employees. Likewise, technical evaluation of public safety radio and CAD options need to be fully explored. These areas are just a few examples of the many issues that need to be determined through a lengthy implementation process.

Q. What is the amount of current versus state funds required?

A. As noted above, looking at current operational costs, it appears that it will not cost more for the majority of cities and towns to join the RECC. In the few cases where it may cost more, the increase will be marginal. There will be significant start-up costs that are eligible for grant funding through the state.

Q. What percentage of capital costs has State 9-1-1 paid for other projects?

A. This really depends on the project, but the Grant Funding Guidelines (Attachment 4) details Fiscal Year 2012 funds and guidelines. GeoComm has requested additional input from the Executive Director of Massachusetts State 9-1-1 Department.

Q. Is it difficult to start up two RECCs with current call volume; will all communities participate?

A. Participation is a local decision. GeoComm has laid out a technical, operational, and financial plan and implementation recommendations in each of these areas. The final report provides current and future financial status as well as facility and staffing needs for the RECCs. Decision makers within each community are responsible for reviewing these details in order to make an informed decision about proceeding with the recommendations. As an added benefit to the region, many of the recommendations are advantageous to all jurisdictions whether or not consolidation occurs. Communities should be aware that this is a long process of developing the detailed implementation plan, funding, etc. In addition, the RECCs can still be successful without 100% participation. Even with 100% participation, it is expected that actual implementation will be a phased-in process rather than a full cut-over on a specific day.

Q. What is the likelihood of towns being required to have two dispatchers?

A. At this point there is no requirement within Massachusetts but other states are beginning to require two operators in dispatch. One such example is North Carolina which is establishing rules requiring two dispatchers on duty at all times in order for a PSAP to receive state 9-1-1 funding. Even though Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) can be contracted with other sources, there are still limitations and risks of having one dispatcher on duty at a time.



In GeoComm's professional judgment, implementation of a consistent and effective EMD program necessitates a minimum staffing of two dispatchers to permit appropriate focus and handling of emergency medical calls.

There are other risks local governments should consider. With only one person on duty in a PSAP there are increased security concerns, a single point of failure should the person become ill or otherwise incapacitated, and no depth of resources in the event of a major incident or multiple routine events.

Q. How much will it cost to upgrade the radio systems?

A. The exact cost is unknown at this point and requires further study. It is safe to say the cost will be significant with preliminary estimates between \$4 million and \$20 million depending on the needs and options developed. Determination of an exact cost will require a more in depth radio study beyond the scope of this project. However, a full radio study and new radio system are eligible for Support Grants through the Massachusetts State 9-1-1 Department.

Raynham Public Meeting

Q. Who gets priority at a RECC?

A. Currently, each agency prioritizes responses to incoming calls based upon severity. There will be no change in this process in a RECC. The prioritization details will be worked out during the policy and procedure implementation stage and agreed upon by the governance entity which will include representation from all involved agencies.

With new response plans and run-sheets created for the RECCs, there is an opportunity to thoroughly examine current policies and create plans that improve the use of available resources and deliver improved services to the communities.

Q. Will agencies lose local control? Today a Chief can make instant changes and manage staff.

A. A governance structure to manage the entire RECC operation will be established with representation from each community, usually the local Chiefs, and the hiring a professional staff. This structure works very well in other parts of Massachusetts and across the country. Dispatchers may find the governance by a dedicated professional management structure is an improvement.

Q. Is it dangerous to the public if police station is closed?

A. There are many ways to provide improved protection to the public if or when the dispatch function is moved to a RECC. In many agencies, the dispatcher serves as the police station receptionist. Possible solutions include:



- Hire a true receptionist – administrative assistant to do this work, probably at a lower rate than the current occupant of that position.
- Installation of a hot-dial telephone that automatically connects to the appropriate RECC at the entrance to each closed station for use by citizens who arrive at the station to request assistance or report an emergency. This is further described in section three of the Final Feasibility Report and Implementation Plan.

Q. Will it be inconvenient to people who work all days to take care of business if police station open only during business hours?

A. This will have to be addressed by each community. Some of the business may be accomplished via E-Government implementations, i.e. online permit and fee submission, electronic access to accident records (subject to the appropriate authorization), etc.

Q. Is there concern for officer safety?

A. The dispatchers in a RECC have the same interest and concern for an officer's safety as local dispatchers. Through improved communications, the use of upgraded and integrated CAD systems, uniformed training, and management by a professional staff, safety for police officers, firefighters, and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) will be improved.

Q. Is there a greater chance that sensitive information could be leaked, dealing with people they do not know?

A. Information security will be a key part of the RECC governance with appropriate safeguards and procedures in place. With a uniform and professionally managed operation, sensitive information will have more protection than may be provided by some of the current operations.

Q. Will the implementation of EMD eliminate secondary PSAPs?

A. Yes, but under the proposed model the RECC will receive all 9-1-1 and non-emergency calls for service and dispatch all responders – thereby eliminating the need for secondary PSAPs in the region resulting in an improved response time and more efficient service.

Q. Will this work; there is not a good history with regionalization (sewer and schools)?

A. There are also many examples of positive experiences with regionalized schools, sewer systems, and dispatch operations. In cases where regionalization has resulted in less than favorable results, the cause is often associated with ineffective governance models and budget issues. The establishment of a governance system that provides local operational and budget control is a key part of this recommendation.



Q. How will station and ancillary duties be handled? It is currently a chief's decision.

A. As discussed in the final report, the importance of a local public safety presence in each of the participating communities is recognized. Each local agency plays a large role in providing community services in addition to answering and dispatching 9-1-1 calls. Ultimately, each local community must make its own determination for handling these tasks consistent with the community standard of care, service level expectations, and available resources. Some agencies may elect to add staff to perform continuing activities; other agencies will modify the procedures for providing governmental services. During the transition period, local communities will have the opportunity to educate their citizens on new service methods. In the final report, section three, GeoComm outlines "closed station issues" that are of concern to local agencies and provides recommendations and solutions.

Q. Were multiple alternatives considered?

A. There were many alternatives considered as part of this process some of which were discussed in previous reports completed as part of this study. Some of the alternatives considered were determined to be infeasible based on either political, operational, or financial considerations. Other alternatives were more fully examined including continuing as currently structured with no changes and various levels of partial consolidation.

Q. Will this solution cost more in the long run than save money?

A. There is no evidence to support the assertion that consolidating operations and sharing resources will cost more money. There is substantial evidence to support the position that economies of scale are possible by intergovernmental sharing of resources. The costs-savings shown in this report reflect the savings in staff directly associated with the public safety dispatch operation, including administrative support. The long- terms savings should be greater when costs are calculated for scheduled and mandatory equipment upgrades for EMD and Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG9-1-1) implementations, improved training, and much needed facility improvements.

Q. Should the region be concerned about impersonal service?

A. There is no reason to believe the professional management, supervision and staff personnel assigned to the RECCs would not be just as focused on providing a high level of competent, customer service. It will be up to the PSCB and RECC management to ensure that the operational quality and customer service focus is maintained in accordance with the communities' and agencies' standards. It is anticipated that most of the dispatch personnel in the new RECCs would come from the cadre of personnel currently employed by public safety agencies in the region.

There are a variety of technical tools that will assist personnel in providing exceptional customer service include new CAD systems that are able to contain local information and address aliases and the enhanced



Geographic Information System (GIS) capabilities of the NG9-1-1 system will enable RECC dispatchers to more accurately locate the caller and as well assign the appropriate emergency services.

Q. Is there concern about dispatcher to field unit ratio?

A. Unfortunately, there is no scientific standard for determining the most efficient and effective dispatcher to field unit ratio. GeoComm has examined the ratio in dozens of agencies across the country and while there is no accepted formula the staffing recommendations contained within the report are made with confidence.

It would be inappropriate to compare the dispatcher to field unit ratio in the current structure to that recommended in the report. The new structure would be a completely separate environment with more disciplined radio operations supported by more resources. Further, there are many techniques for handling a spike in radio activity such as prompt reassignment of field units to a specialized dispatcher when call situational variables require dedicated staff. These techniques are possible in an RECC environment.

Q. It is impossible to close a station, correct?

A. In most cases it will not apply to larger operations. In reality, there are many police and fire stations in Massachusetts and across the country that close their stations to the public during the evening and night shifts. This does not affect the availability of police, firefighters, or EMTs. There are technology and staffing changes that can mitigate the impact of a closing a station to the public. However, this will be a decision made by the local officials.

