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Consolidating Police Communication Services for the Cities of Menlo Park and San Carlos

Issue

Has the consolidation of Menlo Park and San Carlos Police Communications Centers proven to be an effective strategy?

Summary

In early 2005, the San Carlos Police Department (SCPD) evaluated its Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD)/Records Management Systems (RMS) and found it to be nearing the end of its useful life. The cost of upgrading to a new system was estimated to be very expensive.

Studies by both the SCPD and the Menlo Park Police Department (MPPD) determined that combining their communication systems into one dispatching office would be beneficial to both agencies. The total consolidation package was unanimously approved by city councils of the City of Menlo Park and the City of San Carlos late in 2006.

Under this new communications structure, the MPPD is responsible for receiving and dispatching police calls for both cities. The dispatching center is located in Menlo Park and the SCPD dispatching office has been eliminated.

The San Carlos dispatchers were to be absorbed by the MPPD dispatching office, but three of the four San Carlos dispatchers opted to seek employment elsewhere, thereby, leaving MPPD dispatchers to work longer hours until new dispatchers could be hired. Initially, job applications were accepted only from experienced police dispatchers. Recently, requirements have been expanded to include a limited number of entry level applicants.

Reductions in personnel and operating expenses have been a financial benefit for both Menlo Park and San Carlos. Although the dispatchers have been working longer hours, the quality of service in Menlo Park and San Carlos seems to have remained high and the consolidation appears to be very successful after a year of operation.

The Grand Jury recommends the City of Menlo Park continue its present hiring practices, expand its in-house training, and consider further consolidation with other compatible agencies.

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Background

The 2007-2008 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) has examined the approach taken by the MPPD and the SCPD to meet continuing budget constraints without sacrificing the safety and service that their respective communities have come to expect. In 2005, the SCPD Computer Aided Dispatch/Records Management Systems (CAD/RMS) was nearing the end of its useful life, prompting the SCPD to explore the feasibility of combining their communication systems with those of the MPPD. After a year of assessment, the following consolidation package was agreed upon:

- The MPPD provides dispatching services for SCPD from a communication center in Menlo Park; the SCPD dispatching office is eliminated.
- The SCPD purchases the latest multi-agency version of the CAD/RMS system compatible with MPPD and upgrades all mobile computers along with all the necessary accessories.
- The City of Menlo Park hires the San Carlos dispatching staff as Menlo Park employees subject to background checks, medical examinations, and successful performance evaluation. Employee merits, sick time, and vacation time carry over.
- All dispatchers are cross-trained and qualified to handle calls with Menlo Park and San Carlos.

Investigation

The Grand Jury familiarized itself with a basic overview of the police dispatching system through a tour of the San Mateo County Central Dispatching Office in Redwood City, and an interview with the Communications Center Director. This was followed by a tour of the Menlo Park Police Dispatchers Communications Center and an interview with a Communications Supervisor. The Grand Jury observed the consolidated operation and spoke with dispatchers. Written questions about the consolidation, general police procedures, and growing trends in law enforcement were sent to the City of Menlo Park

Chief of Police and the City of San Carlos Chief of Police. The Grand Jury received helpful answers.

Published articles and government documents listed in Appendix A were also consulted.

Findings

The City of San Carlos was operating a CAD/RMS that was nearing the end of its useful life. Although this system is still used by some police agencies, it is incompatible with many new systems coming on line. Therefore, it is no longer the current technology. The replacement cost was estimated at approximately \$300,000.

A joint staff study with SCPD and MPPD estimated the consolidation would be economically beneficial to both departments. Full time dispatching services for San Carlos would be based in Menlo Park, and the San Carlos police dispatching office would be eliminated. Further, San Carlos would convert its CAD/RMS to CAD/Records Information and Management System (RIMS) to be compatible with Menlo Park.

The transition to a consolidated system cost SCPD \$186,586 for communications equipment, CAD/RMS, and data conversion. Under terms of the merger, San Carlos also pays Menlo Park \$574,713 annually, with a 5% increase per year. The reduction of four dispatchers and the associated cost provides San Carlos with an estimated annual savings of \$244,284. The details of these costs are given in Appendix B. The five year consolidation agreement began in November 2006. San Carlos made its first annual payment to Menlo Park in November 2007.

The agreement required the four San Carlos dispatchers to be rehired as employees of the City of Menlo Park subject to background checks and a medical examination. A three month probationary period was also required of all employees hired, and passage of a performance evaluation, according to Menlo Park standards, had to be achieved. Employee merits, sick time, and vacation time would carry over. None of the four San Carlos dispatchers initially transferred:

- One opted for the police academy.
- One did not meet the qualifications.
- One found employment closer to home.
- One took a position with higher pay, but later accepted transfer to MPPD.

Menlo Park dispatchers worked longer hours, and temporary contract dispatchers were employed to maintain the level of customer service that existed before the merger. The response rate from “dispatch to arrival” on 911 calls remained the same as it was prior to consolidation--three to five minutes for both Menlo Park and San Carlos.

The MPPD Communications Center was constructed with an expansion capability so it could accommodate the consolidation. Many backup systems are in place to minimize risks (e.g., power or communication failures) associated with consolidation. These backup measures include power generators, microwave communication systems, a complete Ham Radio Base Station and the ability to transfer calls to alternate dispatching centers.

Conclusions

Budget constraints on public safety agencies have forced communities to think of innovative ways to maintain a high level of service at reduced costs.

The consolidation of Menlo Park and San Carlos Police Communications Center appears to be operating quite successfully in spite of staffing shortages. Staffing shortfalls occurred during the transition and have persisted, largely because the expected transfer of the four San Carlos dispatchers to become Menlo Park employees did not fully materialize. The resulting staffing shortage has required the hiring of temporary contract dispatchers and longer hours for Menlo Park dispatchers until staff levels return to normal. The unique qualities needed to qualify as a police dispatcher have led to constant demand for experienced dispatchers in a very difficult job market. Thus, the original requirement that all applicants be experienced police dispatchers had to be modified to include entry level applicants, who meet the other qualifications.

The consolidation of MPPD and SCPD dispatch centers has allowed both communities to have access to a state-of-the-art communications system that greatly enhances the ability of the police dispatchers to serve a much larger geographical area and still maintain the former high level of service. In the process, the consolidation has been financially beneficial to both SCPD and MPPD.

The Grand Jury believes the decision to consolidate by the San Carlos City Council and the Menlo Park City Council was correct. The law enforcement agencies of both cities and the Menlo Park Police dispatchers are to be commended.

Recommendations

The Menlo Park City Council work with the Menlo Park Chief of Police and the Director of the consolidated Communications Center to consider:

1. Hiring and training more entry-level dispatch personnel.
2. Expanding in-house training for dispatch personnel.
3. Evaluating the current Communications Center capacity with a view toward potential partnership with another agency.

Appendix A: Sources of Information

Menlo Park Council Meeting: August 1, 2006, Staff Report #06-136, Item#D2
Menlo Park 2005-2006 General Fund Budget
City of Menlo Park website
San Carlos Council Meeting: June 26, 2006, Agenda Item#9a
San Carlos 2005 Annual Budget
City of San Carlos website
Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Handbook
911 Dispatcher Magazine
CHP-Public Safety Dispatchers website
Public Administration Review. Vol.33, No.5 (Sept.-Oct.1973), pp.423-432
Crime and Justice. Vol.15, Modern Policing (1992)
Telecommunications Engineering Associates, San Carlos, California
Sun Ridge Systems, El Dorado Hills, California

Appendix B: City of San Carlos Sources of Funds and Costs Associated with Dispatcher Consolidation

Transition Costs:

Data Conversion:	\$ 15,000
Equipment/Radio:	40,200
CAD/RMS:	<u>131,386</u>

Total: **\$186,586**

Funds for Transition:

Global Imaging System (GIS) Grant:	\$ 30,000
Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Grant:	44,845
911 Center Grant from State of California:	<u>129,000</u>

Total: **\$203,845**

Annual Communications Costs:

Maintenance:	\$ 25,838
Overhead:	43,579
Operational:	58,987
Personnel:	<u>446,309</u>

Total: **\$574,713**

Summary:

Budget (pre-consolidation):	\$ 818,997
Paid to MPPD:	<u>(574,713)</u>

Estimated Annual Savings: **\$ 244,284**

CITY OF MENLO PARK RESPONSE

April 14, 2008

Honorable Joseph C. Scott
Judge of the Superior Court
Hall of Justice
400 County Center, 2nd floor
Redwood City, CA 94063-1655

Re: 2007-2008 Grand Jury Response regarding the Consolidation of Police Communications Services for the Cities of Menlo Park and San Carlos

Dear Honorable Joseph C. Scott,

Thank you for allowing the Menlo Park Police Department to respond to the report regarding Emergency Service Communication Consolidation.

The City of Menlo Park agrees with the findings of the Grand Jury that:

1. **Hiring and training more entry-level dispatch personnel** – As reported, the Menlo Park Police Department's Dispatch Center has been challenged to attain the full staffing level of eleven dispatchers. Since the completion of the Grand Jury report three dispatchers have been hired; one of which is an entry level dispatcher. This newly hired dispatcher is the first entry level dispatcher hired since 1988. Historically the Department has been able to attract dispatchers with prior dispatching experience (lateral employees), but as in all segments of policing the availability of lateral officers has declined. Although entry level officers need significantly more training than lateral officers, the Department is committed to a hiring balance of entry and lateral level dispatchers.
2. **Expanding in-house training for dispatch personnel** – The Department agrees that in-house training is critical for the success of the newly hired dispatcher, entry or lateral level. The Department has reviewed its training practices and has taken steps to improve the manner in which training will be conducted. Prior to this review and not since the consolidation of San Carlos had training practices been adjusted.

An analysis of the training was conducted and three significant changes were made.

- a. A four week orientation/training program was developed. This orientation will provide information and training to the new hire in the less stressful atmosphere of a meeting room. Previously, most training

was conducted in the Dispatch Center while radio traffic and phone call taking was being conducted.

- b. The training manual that contains the learning domains was updated to include new training methods and pertinent information to the City of San Carlos.
- c. Trainees will now have three phases of training after their initial four week in-house orientation and training program.
 - i. Phase One – will consist of computer entry and call taking. After reaching a level of competency, the new dispatcher will progress to Phase Two.
 - ii. Phase Two – will add dispatching for the City of San Carlos which has less radio traffic than Menlo Park.
 - iii. Phase Three – will be the final phase of training where the dispatcher will be trained on the Menlo Park radio frequency.

As the new dispatchers are trained, the program will be reviewed and any needed changes made for the success of the dispatcher trainee.

- 3. **Evaluating the current Communications Center capacity with a view toward potential partnership with another agency.** – The City of Menlo Park is favorable to the expansion of the Communications Center to house a third agency. The inclusion would be dependent on several factors, the size of the organization, the annual calls for service, the number of employees and residents, and the financial health of the merger city.

Thank you,

Bruce A. Goitia
Chief of Police
Menlo Park Police Department

Cc: Greg Rothaus, Chief of Police, San Carlos Police Department