

Article published Feb 26, 2015

Towbin: Rural towns call for help Rural towns call for help

In Vermont who pays the cost for handling, or dispatching, a 911 call? Answer: That depends on your location. Each town is responsible for its own emergency response contract. In most cases taxes for this service are assessed from local property taxes. In some rare instances, due to archaic agreements, the state taxpayer absorbs the full bill.

Strangely, three neighboring municipalities can have three separate dispatch centers. Barre City has its own facility. Barre Town uses Lamoille County dispatch. Plainfield uses Montpelier dispatch via a contract with the Capital Fire Mutual Aid System. This makes little practical sense as there are cost and service savings to be had in consolidating operations.

Emergency dispatch centers require highly skilled professionals who use expensive call centers supported by costly infrastructure. In Vermont this has meant that larger communities, with robust tax bases, own the equipment and hire the employees. This erodes the sense that dispatch is a community mission in that they feel overburdened by serving nontaxpayers.

Just across Lake Champlain, in Clinton County, New York, their centralization offers some interesting insights into approaching the problem. New York and other states collect revenues for emergency dispatch by charging a surcharge on telecommunications activity (phone, Internet). Towns are not in the business of brokering contracts for this complicated service. This might not be ideal for Vermont, but the current method of placing all the burden on local property owners disproportionately impacts residents of smaller towns.

This coming year the Plainfield property owners will be paying 100 percent more for emergency dispatch. As a Select Board member, my dismay was initially directed at the Capital Fire Mutual Aid System and

the city of Montpelier. How could the cost of a vital service double overnight while the city of Montpelier pays more than 15 percent less? Why the automatic increases that are more than double the rate of inflation?

Scott Bagg, the treasurer of the mutual aid service, organized a meeting with various select board members, Chief Anthony Facos and key members of his organization. The gathering was enlightening. I met a hardworking group of seasoned professionals trying to do their best in an outdated system that tries to square the complicated needs of modern dispatch with a fractured method of assessing payment.

The leaders at the mutual aid system, Montpelier, Plainfield and other towns are doing their best to represent their constituencies. The problem is a system that encourages discord by failing to unify all parties to produce a modern emergency response system that will benefit everyone, regardless of narrow geographical boundaries.

After Plainfield's new five-year contract ends, will there be another doubling of the price of this vital service? Answer: hopefully not, but there are no guarantees. At the Capital Fire Mutual Aid System meeting it was revealed that the towers, the backbone of the system, are in need of major repairs. Who will foot that bill?

The smaller towns are in a very precarious position. The mutual aid system has no bargaining leverage with the larger dispatch centers. A provision of the new contract bears this out by stating that should Montpelier and Barre merge their operations, the Capital Fire Mutual Aid System would be at the table. This was listed as a benefit to the new arrangement. In other words, the simple act of being represented is considered a favor by the larger entities.

This is not surprising in that the cities of Barre and Montpelier have their own needs and, by default, the smaller towns' interests are secondary. The options for small towns to go elsewhere are limited. Barre City or Lamoille County could be even more expensive. They have no incentive to give the smaller towns a price break. Going forward, under the current system, towns such as Plainfield and Calais should expect exponential increases for this service.

What to do? Taxpayers need to understand that modern first response goes beyond a simple one-time answer to a specific incident.

Nowadays operators are required to be in contact with numerous responders at many times during a single event. This demands up-to-date equipment and training. That costs money.

Taxpayers need to understand that this will be expensive, but it should not be needlessly burdensome to one particular group. First responders should devise a realistic overall assessment of needs unbound by provincial concerns of each town. That information should be delivered to select board members and state legislators who could meet to discuss a revised funding approach.

This new system will be predicated on the idea of giving emergency workers what they need while buffering local taxpayers against unwieldy price increases.

Who should pay and how much? That is the cardinal question every time government provides a service. Fortunately people of all political stripes agree that police/fire/emergency service is a basic government responsibility.

We also know that the current system is arbitrary and unfair. The burden need not fall exclusively on the property owner, the renter, the phone user, the telecommunications company — all participants can contribute to an equitable system. In the future small-town residents need not fear huge price increases due to dispatch costs. In addition all citizens will know that first responders are backed by the best communications infrastructure available. They deserve it. Scott Bagg and Chief Facos will be able to focus exclusively on Vermonters in need, rather than defending funding needs.

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