

Shared Dispatch Center Would Save Area Towns Millions, Study Finds

Mayors see Benefits to Public Safety as Well as to Bottom Line

A study commissioned by Belmar, Bradley Beach, Lake Como, Avon, Neptune City and Neptune Township has concluded that sharing a single center for police dispatching would save the six towns a combined \$3.2 million in dispatcher salaries, overtime, and operating expenses in its first five years.

The study, begun last fall, and paid for with a SHARE grant from the state, was conducted by Intertech Associates, a leading technology engineering firm based in Freehold, New Jersey. After analyzing the number and types of calls for service that each town receives, as well as equipment, staffing, and procedures, the study found that Neptune Township's newly constructed dispatch center would be well suited to serve as a consolidated communications center for the six towns. Neptune Township is already a qualified 911 dispatch center, and has recently remodeled both its dispatch area and its jail.

Belmar Mayor Ken Pringle commented, "Sharing services with other towns only makes sense if your town can both save money, and get better value for your residents and taxpayers. This plan will achieve these goals by saving Belmar taxpayers more than a half million dollars over the next five years, and in the process freeing our police officers to spend more time on patrol in Belmar. This joint effort will also strongly position our towns to realize further efficiencies through future shared service opportunities with the Monmouth County Sheriff's Department. In the coming years, governments at all levels will come under unprecedented pressure to cut costs as we work to dig New Jersey out of its fiscal hole. Local officials will be called upon as never before to work cooperatively to find shared savings, while maintaining or improving the level of service we provide our residents. Since our 6-town group began this effort more than a year ago, we've not only forged a great working relationship with each other, but we've succeeded in developing a shared service partnership that will surely serve as a model for other communities to follow."

Neptune City Mayor Tom Arnone agreed. "If services were going to suffer, this would be a non-starter. Let's face it: Savings are important, but safety is more important. While Neptune Township's police headquarters has been under renovation, we've processed prisoners in Neptune City, and it's worked just fine. It can be done, and done well, so long as all parties are working in a truly cooperative and collaborative manner, for the overall good of the public and the taxpayer. That's what we're doing here. The Monmouth County Sheriff, Shaun Golden, has built one of the best 911 call centers in the state here in Monmouth County, and he supports what we're trying to do, and believes that what our study proposes will work." Neptune City's estimated five-year savings in a shared service, is \$766,000 (not including startup cost).

Some of the projected savings would be offset by a comparatively small startup cost for equipment modifications, including radio equipment that the municipalities would need to purchase in order for Neptune broadcast to the municipalities' dedicated radio frequencies,

and some simple upgrades to backup communications systems. The towns' startup capital costs are nevertheless estimated to be considerably less than what the towns stand to gain in savings in the first year of the shared service. Neptune Township Mayor Mary Beth Jahn pointed out, "This shared service will save Neptune Township some money, and that is of value to the taxpayer, but more importantly, it makes sense for all of these towns to work together, and it will slow the future growth of costs in a way that will dwarf the first-year savings. Neptune has an asset that can be of value to people beyond our borders, so we intend to derive the maximum value from that asset for Neptune residents, as well as the surrounding area, for years to come."

The study also noted that in most towns, dispatchers do more than dispatch – between calls, dispatchers may provide clerical support for the police, and are available to keep an eye on prisoners. The recommendation from the study is that towns reassign clerical functions to clerical workers (at a lower cost), and share the cost of a professional jailer position at Neptune Township to handle prisoner processing. Neptune Township stands to save \$961,000 over five years in addition to bolstering police presence in the community by eliminating the use of police officers to administer and operate the current dispatch center at Neptune.

Bradley Beach Mayor Julie Schreck was especially interested in this aspect. "We've reduced our 18-person police force by two officers (11%) due to attrition in the past year and a half," she said. "Our officers have expressed the concern that the time they spend doing prisoner intake takes them off the streets when they are already stretched a bit thinner. By enabling officers to drop off a prisoner in trained hands in Neptune, and be back on patrol in Bradley Beach in a few minutes, and not have to keep returning to headquarters to conduct cell checks, we can not only save money, we can improve our officers' working conditions, and keep them out on patrols, where they belong, and have told us they prefer to be." Bradley Beach's estimated five-year savings under the proposed plan would be \$514,000, minus any upfront costs.

Lake Como Mayor Michael Ryan concurred that "Preserving our police officers' ability to do what they swear an oath to do and what we pay them to do has to be front and center in any decisions we make on sharing services. Lake Como has already had great success relying on Belmar for dispatching, and there is no reason to believe that our residents will experience any change in quality once their calls are going to point B instead of point A. It's not as if our officers are over in Neptune waiting to be dispatched. They are in town, on patrol. Phones and radio work just as fast into and out of Neptune as they do in our police headquarters or Belmar's." Lake Como stands to save about \$6,000 over five years; less than other towns because Lake Como is already sharing Belmar's dispatch services.

Avon Administrator Timothy Gallagher commented: "To have a regional dispatch service is definitely the way to go. Whether it be Monmouth County or Neptune Township, centralizing dispatching will bring a savings to the taxpayer while increasing police coverage."

Implementing the study's recommendations would require the towns to enter into an interlocal service agreement, put in place the hardware to enable direct radio communications from Neptune, and a backup communications system (WiMax or

microwave) in case the main system were disabled, plan for retention and relocation of dispatchers to Neptune, reassign clerical work, and agree on their share of wages for a jailer. Laying this ground work could take up to six months. The study therefore recommends that if the towns enter into the interlocal agreement, they look to October 1, 2010 as the optimal implementation date.

Belmar, which acted as the lead town in obtaining the grant and commissioning the study, has posted the report on its website. Readers may view or download the complete report on their towns' websites.

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