

Dispatch Regionalization Working Meeting
March 6, 2012 – 4:30 p.m. – Selectmen’s Meeting Room – Ashby Town Hall

Present – Ashby: Peter McMurray, BOS; Bill Seymour, Fire Chief; Kathy Bezanson, Dispatch; Mike Bussell, Emerg. Mgmt.; Ed Drew, Police Chief.

Present – Ashburnham: Ed Vitone, BOS; Bill Johnson, Advisory Board; Larry Barrett, Police Chief; Paul Zbikowski, Fire Chief.

Ed Vitone began the meeting by stating that their discussion would be focused on the Dispatchers and the review of data regarding call volume in both communities. He also noted that there was a lot of inaccurate reporting in the press on the regionalization efforts that needed clarification.

Ed noted that Ashby and Ashburnham have the same strong Yankee roots with the same independence and that change was difficult. He stated that the Ashburnham Board of Selectmen was advocating both the sharing of the Town Administrator and the regional dispatch with the Town of Ashby.

He briefly reviewed the state of the economy at this time and what may be in store for municipalities in the near future. He noted that many communities were near bankruptcy with the towns facing many challenges and this is why Ashburnham has approached Ashby with this proposal as well as the sharing of the Town Administrator’s services, which after six months is working very well. He also noted that sharing the Town Administrator and a regional dispatch center might not be enough. Although there were no other plans to further regionalization, perhaps Ashburnham’s Municipal Light Plant might be a cost effective alternative for Ashby. He did state that they would not regionalize fire, police, ambulance or DPW but that they would consider shared leadership positions. He stated that both towns need to agree to regionalizing dispatch and that the financial burdens of the towns wouldn’t get any easier with time.

Peter McMurray stated that Ashby was in the same boat as Ashburnham. He noted the school budget increase as well as the work needed to the school building. He also noted that the current dispatch/police building failed inspection and needed at least \$200,000 worth of repairs and the Town just doesn’t have the funds to cover all these additional expenses. He noted that the best thing about this regional dispatch agreement is that it would be a 50/50 agreement and the benefits would be great. He stated that there were issues that needed to be worked out but that it could happen as early as fiscal 2014 and it would be moving the town forward. He stated that there were many talented people working on this and they should look at this as a positive step forward.

Ed reviewed the data that was compiled in a study conducted in 2010 with Gardner, Winchendon, and Templeton. It showed that the needs of both Ashby and Ashburnham can be met with one dispatcher/shift. See Dispatch-Regionalization-Staffing.pdf previously distributed.

The following material is presented in the attached document Dispatch-Regionalization-March 6-Rev-0.pdf.

Ed V. then noted that some concerns were raised that these meetings weren’t posted. He contacted the Attorney General’s office to clarify the requirements and was told that the Open Meeting Laws don’t apply to these regional discussions. He stated that although it is not

mandatory, the information has been posted on our town's website, the meetings have been posted voluntarily and have also been announced at the Board of Selectmen meetings.

He noted a second concern brought to their attention by an Ashby resident that a single Town Administrator serving two towns might violate the State's Conflict of Interest Laws. Doug Briggs sent a letter to the Ethics Commission and received a ruling that a single Town Administrator can work for two towns concurrently. The ruling also recommended that, to avoid the appearance of favoring one town's interests over another, Doug should avoid participating in matters where both towns have an interest. Based upon that recommendation, Doug will no longer participate in the regional dispatch discussions.

There was a discussion on what would be included in the grant application. It was noted by Ed V. that assuming we are awarded everything requested in the grant it would total about \$350,000 or higher. He did note that he would recommend both towns have an article at Town Meeting in the amount of \$20,000 to cover any extras not covered by the grant.

The discussion then turned to the staff both in Ashby and Ashburnham. Ed V. noted that the savings would be largely "people" savings. He stated that Ashburnham Dispatch is unionized and that Chief Barrett was speaking to each employee about their interest in accepting a voluntary severance package to create slots for displaced Ashby dispatch personnel. It was viewed to be unlikely that any Ashburnham dispatchers would volunteer.

Ed V. stated that to support a grant submittal by March 16th, Ashby should review the hardware requirements drafted by Chief Barrett and advise Chief Barrett of any changes by March 8th. In addition, the Ashby BOS would have to sign the attestation letter by March 12th or the 13th at the latest. He noted that Ashburnham voted the night before to sign the letter. He did reiterate that even if Ashby signed the letter, they would still have the option to back out after their Town Meeting vote.

Peter reiterated his view that the employees were his top concern but that the town was facing many expenses that they just can't afford. He was also committed to keeping the three full-time dispatchers employed. He also stated again that Ashby's role in the regional dispatch was a 50/50 proposition and it would be overseen by both Chiefs from each town as well as the Emergency Management personnel.

Ed V. again stated that the question tonight was should we submit the grant application or not and if yes, would need the commitment this week for Larry to work on quotes and complete the application.

The grant hardware proposed by Chief Barrett would be reviewed by Mike Bussell, Chief Drew, Chief Seymour and Kathy Bezanson. Ed V. did reiterate that we may not get all that we ask for in the grant.

The meeting adjourned at 6:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Sylvia Turcotte, Assistant to the Town Administrator
Town of Ashburnham