

**WhatComm Prospect Sub-Committee Report  
September 27, 2021**

**Committee Members: Rud Browne, John Crawford, Hollie Huthman, Scott Korthuis, and Jim Peeples**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Public safety is the primary obligation of every public official. How this service is delivered to the community should be of utmost concern. Delivering the service in a safe, expeditious and efficient way should drive our decision processes.

This report is given to outline what the Committee learned. The Committee desires that the WhatComm Board consider carefully the data presented in order to make decisions which will provide the best possible public safety for the community.

**Dispatching Delay.** The 911 system in Whatcom County is managed by the WhatComm and Prospect call centers. All 911 calls are initially received by WhatComm; Emergency Medical Service (EMS) and fire calls are forwarded to Prospect. The data from the call centers shows an approximate 20 second delay for calls that need to be transferred to Prospect. This delay would be reduced by consolidating the service and cross training to handle all call types. Then, when critical health events occur, where time is always of the essence, EMS will be dispatched as soon as possible.

**Staff Utilization and Cost.** When reviewing data from the call centers it becomes very apparent that the staff at WhatComm handles considerably more calls than the Prospect center and is active a higher percentage of the time. Approximately 23% of the time WhatComm operators are on active calls compared to 7% for Prospect operators. Consolidation of the two facilities would bring workloads to parity and could potentially save in operation costs since the same quantity of employees could handle simultaneous calls. WhatComm staff level has not kept pace with county-wide increases in population, law enforcement (LE) resources serviced, or call volume over the last two decades. The disparity between the current staff authorized and the staff required to run a consolidated center responsibly would be less than the additional staff required to maintain two separate centers moving forward.

**Facility.** While the Committee was undertaking the task of reviewing the call centers, it also became apparent that these facilities need to be addressed. The WhatComm facility is antiquated and needs to be updated to handle current and future needs. Currently, WhatComm has inadequate space for needed additional staff, special event coverage, and training which now must take place on the console room floor. Prospect is also planning an expansion in the near future. Consolidation could give us an opportunity to build a new facility that would better meet the needs of the community and be much safer for staff in the event of a significant earthquake.

A change of this scope will not be easy. There will be a need to significantly train operators in both LE and EMS dispatching. The cultures of both WhatComm and Prospect will necessarily undergo change, but ultimately the public good would be served. The changes would be best accomplished if managed over a 5-year period. A goal would be to have a new consolidated service in place in a new building by 2027.

The Committee reviewed activity at other call centers in Washington. Of interest were input from Spokane and Benton counties. Both have successfully made significant changes in operation that have

had positive outcomes. In Spokane, they switched from independent LE and EMS dispatching to consolidated dispatching. In Benton, they combined two local call centers into one. The leaders in these communities took bold steps, and the outcome has yielded better service.

Following is a broader discussion on these topics.

## **PURPOSE OF THE COMMITTEE**

In 2020, during the early stages of the COVID pandemic, all government agencies were looking for ways to streamline government services to save cash and improve efficiencies. During a meeting of all the elected officials in Whatcom County, the WhatComm 911 service was suggested as an agency that might be able to become more efficient while also providing better service to our community.

We have a system today that dispatches services fairly effectively. We know there is a delay between answering a call at WhatComm and dispatching from Prospect. One of the goals of the Committee was to determine if that delay is significant, and to analyze if there is a way to shorten the delay to get critical medical attention to the caller sooner.

Knowing that our current service has split dispatch for LE and fire we were tasked with determining if this is the best method of dispatch or if there is a better model for the system.

Therefore, three choices were before us:

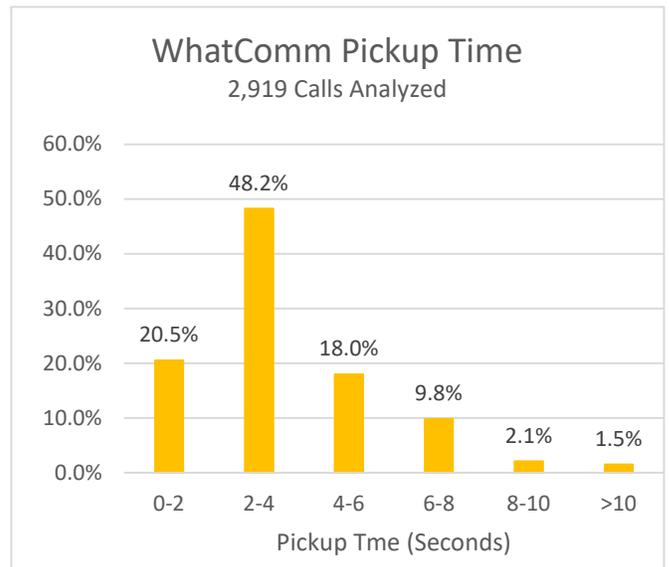
1. Maintain the existing system with separate law enforcement and fire dispatching centers
2. Co-locate the services in a unified location
3. Consolidate the services

While investigating the above, it became apparent that there is another need that must be met. The WhatComm facility is antiquated and needs to be upgraded. The City of Bellingham is considering a new call center in a proposed multi-purpose, multi-story building being proposed near the current Bellingham Municipal Court building. Other options might need to be explored.

Knowing this need, an additional outcome of this report is to briefly look at facility concerns.

**DISPATCHING DELAY**

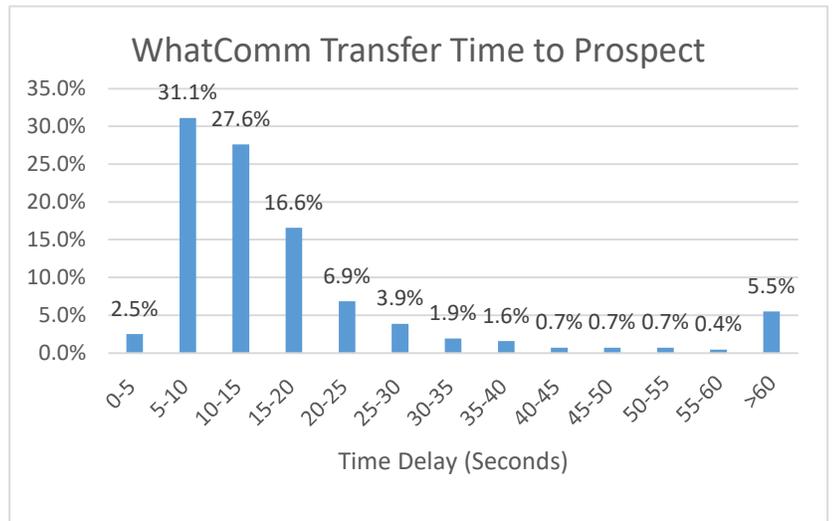
The 911 call service in Whatcom County is split into two call centers. WhatComm is the primary service and it receives approximately 140,000 calls per year. Most of these calls are dispatched to LE, but approximately 15% of the calls are specifically related to fire or EMS. These calls are forwarded to the Prospect call center where the operators proceed to dispatch specific aid to the caller. The Committee looked at 2,919 calls on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of each month for 2019 and 2020.



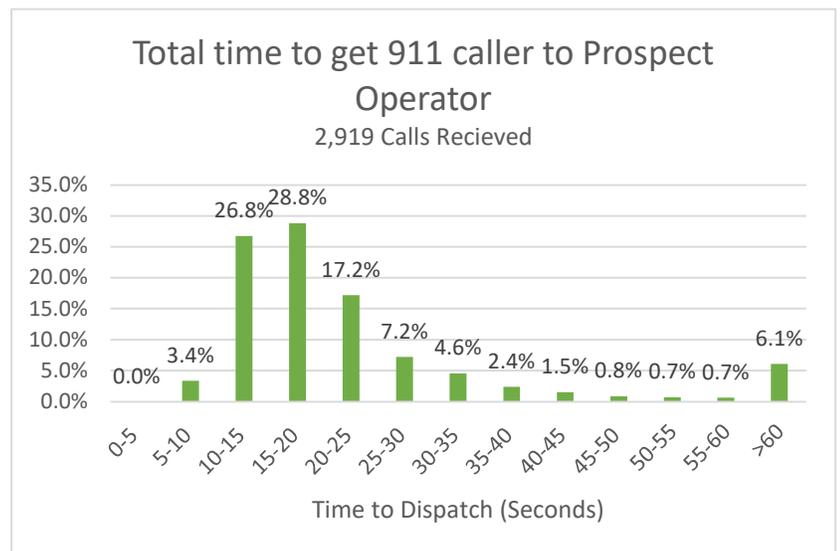
**Figure 1**

A typical call sequence:

1. 911 call coming into WhatComm
  - a. 98.5% of calls are answered within 10 seconds (see Figure 1)
2. Operator gets information from the caller and must determine if it is an LE or a Fire/EMS call.
  - a. 78% of the calls are transferred in less than 20 seconds (see Figure 2).
  - b. If we assume a delay of over 40 seconds is both an LE and EMS call, then transfer times of 20-40 seconds account for about 14% of the calls.
3. If a call is transferred to Prospect:
  - a. The interview process starts over. This is another delay in a quick response.
  - b. Rarely are initial caller comments transferred from WhatComm to Prospect.
4. The total time for the caller to get connected to a Prospect operator is outlined in Figure 3. Note: data shows that no caller gets to Prospect in less than the minimum transfer time of 7 seconds.



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

In critical cases, like heart attacks, strokes, traumatic injuries, and other time-sensitive medical conditions, response time is clearly

important to the caller and the medical patient.

There is an average 20-second delay that, by definition, can only have a negative impact on critical care calls; this problem of delay can be best reduced by consolidation and cross-training. This would be the most compelling reason to consolidate. This would improve safety and get the service to the constituents expeditiously.

Unfortunately, as noted above, once the caller is transferred to Prospect none of the call intake information received by WhatComm is transferred; the caller must restate any critical, already given information, like nature of the call and location. To say the least, this can be confusing and frustrating to a person calling with a critical medical emergency, and we cannot expect all callers to remain conscience to repeat the process. While frustration is not ideal and is best avoided, caller confusion can compound the current system's inherent delays and result in dire consequences.

### STAFF UTILIZATION AND COST

We have collected data on staff utilization. The staffing levels of both WhatComm and Prospect are important to understand this information in its context.

WhatComm has 25 operators and 4 supervisors, who are on calls approximately 23% of the time. In contrast, the Prospect call center has 14 operators and 1 supervisor who are on calls approximately 7% of the time. Another way to look at this is to say that WhatComm Operators are over three times more likely to be on a call compared to the Prospect operators; this striking difference in workload is quite apparent when visiting the centers.

As a committee, we have learned that this job can be quite stressful. For 2022, we are anticipating hiring three more

WhatComm operators and one more Prospect supervisor. These positions are needed now to ease the stress on the employees. If consolidation were implemented and the workload was leveled out, there would be potential savings and potentially less stress caused by mandatory overtime. The Committee would not recommend reducing staff level but would prefer to set a target utilization and then maintain a staff to achieve that target as our population increases.

An example would be to target 20% utilization. This would lower the load for the WhatComm operators and increase the load for the Prospect operators.

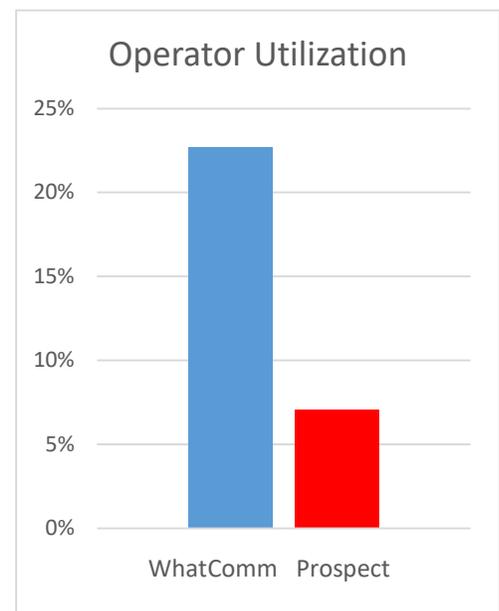


Figure 4

	Employees			Current Utilization		Effective Employees		Target Utilization	
	WhatComm	Prospect	Total	WhatComm	Prospect	WhatComm	Prospect	Total	20.0%
Operators	25	14	39	22.7%	7.1%	5.7	1.0	6.7	33.3
Supervisors	4	1	5	22.7%	7.1%	0.9	0.1	1.0	4.9
Total			44						38.2

This example indicates that consolidation could require up to 6 fewer FTE (from 44 to 38), to handle the current call volume. Assuming 5 employee positions eliminated, then a savings of over \$600,000 per year would be realized. To reiterate, at no time would the Committee recommend reducing current staff. Rather, we would recommend adding staff once the utilization number exceeds 20% (or another target that can be agreed on). In the future, the target utilization number would be the driver for new positions.

It is assumed that existing employee's retirement programs would be unaffected by consolidation as they would be grandfathered in under their existing plans. New hires would be hired under the plan of the current majority of employees.

Another area for potential savings is overtime. Both WhatComm and Prospect operators currently log about 15 hours per month in overtime. Supervisors at WhatComm log on average 18 hours per month of overtime. With consolidation and a utilization target of 20%, overtime could likely be reduced by 5 hours per month per employee. Using a blended rate of \$30 per hour for the 45 employees, a potential cost savings of \$120,000 per year could be realized.

There is potential for other cost savings if the services are consolidated, savings most likely realized over time. About 80% of the cost of the 911 service is labor. There may be other cost savings related to operations, but labor savings will be most significant.

## FACILITIES

Currently, WhatComm is located at 620 Alabama St in a 4,688 square foot facility. Prospect is located at 1800 Broadway in a space that is 576 square feet. The WhatComm facility has likely reached the end of its useful life. Prospect can grow by about 50% in the current building and plans are in the works to do this.

While the Committee was doing their assigned task, facility specifications were provided if a new facility is required due to consolidation. Some of the needs include:

- Sufficient space for 30-50 years of



**WhatComm Facility on Alabama Street**

growth

- Sufficient land for potential expansion in the years beyond 30
- Line of sight to the radio towers in the county would be a safety feature
- Building on land that cannot survive an earthquake or land that would be overcome in a tsunami would not be wise
- Building must be earthquake-proof

Some have suggested the call center be located in Lynden as it is a central location in the county and has line of sight to all the radio towers. This is probably not a good location for the current employee group due to the

distance from the current locations. A good alternate would be the proposed jail location

in Ferndale, which has a line of sight to most of the radio towers. The benefit of this land in Ferndale is the County already owns it. If this site were chosen, a new facility could be built sooner than the 7-10 year plan for relocation in a new Bellingham facility located near the existing courthouse.



**Operator Area at WhatComm**

If the Ferndale location is chosen, the County could build and own the building. Then funding would come from the county. The primary way to pay for the expansion is to use the savings generated by consolidation to fund a bond. The long-term staff savings and overtime reduction generate approximately \$720,000 annually. This could be applied to a bond that would fund roughly \$15 million in construction assuming a 2.5% interest rate over 30 years.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

The Committee sought information from other 911 call centers in the state. Our goal was to pose a set of questions to each center to see how our service stacks up against others in the state.

We did get feedback from some. Spokane and Benton counties have both recently undergone changes and/or consolidation. Spokane County moved from separate LE and Fire/EMS services to a consolidated Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), in a model that might work for Whatcom County. The director at Spokane states that this transition has been a major benefit to the citizens. They previously experienced a similar 20 second delay in response to EMS calls due to the transfer process. This delay has been eliminated. Spokane also moved system management away from LE and Fire/EMS. Their County Council established a new entity using the authority granted by a Public Development Authority (PDA). The PDA now governs the PSAP.

In the case of Whatcom County, a similar PDA could be established and then interlocal agreements could be created between the County and/or the City of Bellingham so duplicate services would not be required in the PDA. This may be the best way to eliminate the perception by some that consolidation would result in one department reporting to another.

Benton County recently consolidated with neighboring Franklin County. While staff from both centers acknowledge that consolidation is a complex and difficult task, they stated that service is better than what they had previously.

Clark and Cowlitz counties also use the consolidated model and provided feedback. Both directors made comments to the effectiveness of the consolidated model and felt it was the only way to deliver safe, effective, efficient service.

Skagit County also runs a consolidated platform. They use separate LE and EMS dispatchers as each public safety entity has a language of its own. All of the dispatchers are trained to do either dispatching, but when on shift only work with either LE or EMS. Skagit has one or two employees on shift who have sufficient training to be able to do either type of dispatching concurrently, so these employees are used to handle uneven call loads.

The Director of Operations at Clark County thinks that relative to the recent changes in Washington law (HB1310), responding to 911 calls can be better handled with a single operator with both LE and EMS in the room able to dispatch concurrently.

## **DISSENT**

Committee members spent a lot of time listening to both LE and EMS providers in the community. A general overview of the feedback would be that LE is somewhat indifferent to consolidation but can see the benefits. EMS had stronger feedback: fire fighters are very much in favor of the status quo and really do not want to entertain the thought of consolidation.

## Appendix A

Link to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> call data times:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/mma5mv66dv523rzgegl1w/Transfer-Stats.xlsx?dl=0&rlkey=f12ipmj3rb53g7hqddd9qygp7>

## Appendix B

WhatComm and Prospect Utilization data:

Month	What-Comm	Prospect
Jun-19	23.89%	6.85%
Jul-19	24.28%	7.90%
Aug-19	24.37%	7.73%
Sep-19	21.12%	6.89%
Oct-19	20.13%	5.94%
Nov-19	21.45%	6.35%
Dec-19	21.43%	7.51%
Jan-20	21.63%	6.76%
Feb-20	22.00%	7.01%
Mar-20	21.49%	6.73%
Apr-20	21.21%	6.17%
May-20	21.34%	7.48%
Jun-20	23.62%	5.91%
Jul-20	24.32%	7.82%
Aug-20	24.92%	8.34%
Sep-20	25.37%	7.66%
Oct-20	22.42%	6.52%
Nov-20	21.00%	6.19%
Dec-20	20.78%	5.50%
Jan-21	20.29%	7.04%
Feb-21	22.69%	7.84%
Mar-21	22.79%	5.87%
Apr-21	22.64%	8.05%
May-21	22.95%	7.17%
Jun-21	25.40%	7.32%
Jul-21	26.45%	8.60%

<b>Overall Average:</b>	<b>22.69%</b>	<b>7.05%</b>
-------------------------	---------------	--------------

## Appendix C

### 2022 Budget information

#### WHAT-COMM /PROSPECT COMMUNICATION CENTERS 2022 BUDGET COST ALLOCATION

##### Budget Cost Allocation Worksheet with Added Staffing

	What-Comm		Prospect	2022 BUDGET	2021 BUDGET	2022 % INC/DEC	NOTES
	(PSAP) CALL TAKING	LAW DISPATCHING	FIRE/EMS DISPATCH				
Administration	419,521	279,680		699,201	867,062	4.82%	
Operations	2,492,818	1,691,113	2,170,675	6,354,606	6,091,556	4.32%	Prospect inc. 50k for medical/fire triage system
Facilities	63,208	42,138	34,049	139,395	122,772	13.54%	Prospect inc. 13k for UPS Replacement
Training	22,584	15,057	35,706	73,347	73,543	-0.27%	
Loan Repayment to City of Bellingham	76,442	50,962	179,059	306,463	304,514	0.64%	Repayment years 2021-2025 \$1,485,993 principle plus interest
CAD Payment	151,000			151,000	151,000	0.00%	Annual CAD Installment Payment 2018-2023
<b>Sub-Total by Operation Center</b>	<b>3,225,573</b>	<b>2,078,950</b>	<b>2,419,489</b>	<b>7,661,012</b>	<b>7,410,447</b>	<b>3.38%</b>	What-comm PSAP operations are allocated by work performed: 60% Call Taking; 40% Law Dispatching. An additional \$29,235 is allocated to Law Dispatch for ACCESS fees and radio equip.
<b>Additional Dispatch Positions</b>	<b>166,800</b>	<b>111,200</b>	<b>150,000</b>	<b>428,000</b>			3 positions at WHAT-COMM and 1 at Prospect
<b>Total Cost by Operation Center</b>	<b>3,392,373</b>	<b>2,190,150</b>	<b>2,569,489</b>	<b>8,089,012</b>	<b>7,410,447</b>	<b>9.16%</b>	
<b>PSAP Tax Revenue Offset</b>							Only the cost of answering 911 calls (Call Taking) is eligible for 911 tax funds usage.
2022 911 Tax Revenue Estimate	(2,000,000)						
2020 Tax Revenue over Estimate	(141,001)						
911 Tax Reserve Use	(320,000)						Reserve use for CAD Maintenance and Installments
2020 State E911 Reimbursements	(48,385)						
<b>PSAP costs not offset by tax revenues</b>	<b>884,987</b>						PSAP costs are allocated on % of incoming 911 calls. Per 2020 Year-End Stats, the split is 81.4% Law and 18.6% transferred to Fire/EMS
<b>User portions of PSAP Costs</b>		<b>720,379</b>	<b>164,608</b>				
<b>Sub-Total 2022 User Fees</b>		<b>2,910,529</b>	<b>2,734,097</b>	<b>5,644,626</b>			
<b>Reserve Repayment</b>		<b>67,833</b>	<b>15,500</b>	<b>83,333</b>	<b>83,333</b>		Facility Repairs costs. Repay to reserves 2019-2024 81.4% Law and 18.6% transferred to Fire/EMS
<b>TOTAL 2022 User Fees</b>		<b>2,978,362</b>	<b>2,749,597</b>	<b>5,727,959</b>	<b>5,053,065</b>	<b>13.36%</b>	