

**WHAT-COMM COMMUNICATIONS CENTER  
ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD  
MINUTES  
April 1, 2021  
Meeting held Via ZOOM**

Present were:

**Administrative Board Members:** Chief Florence Simon, Bellingham Police Department; Seth Fleetwood, Bellingham Mayor; Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive; Rud Browne, Whatcom County Council Chair of the Finance Committee; Mel Blankers, Chief of Everson Fire Department; Bellingham Fire Chief Bill Hewett(non-voting member); Scott Korthuis, Lynden Mayor; Dan Hammill, City of Bellingham Council Chair of the Public Safety Committee and John Crawford, Fire Commissioners Association Representative.

Absent: Bill Elfo, Sheriff, WCSO

Other Panelists in attendance:

Bellingham Fire Department, Prospect Division Chief, Dan McDermott; Scott Grunhurd, Bellingham Police Deputy Chief and Director of WHAT-COMM; Greg Erickson, Deputy Director of WHAT-COMM.

**Opening comments & Introductions:**

Executive Sidhu chaired the meeting in Sheriff Elfo's absence. The meeting was called to order at 1:00pm. Each of the panelists introduced themselves.

There were no public comments made.

**Approval of the Minutes**

Approval of meeting minutes from the September 24,2020 meeting.

Discussion: No discussion.

Executive Sidhu called for a vote to approve the minutes. None opposed.

**WHAT-COMM/PROSPECT Updates**

Presented by WHAT-COMM Deputy Director Greg Erickson & Prospect Division Chief Dan McDermott.

Greg Erickson acknowledged Coni Turner and her upcoming retirement and thanked her for her many years of excellent service. Greg shared the highlights of the challenges of taking care of business during a pandemic and how staff worked hard to add many changes to ensure a safe and healthy work environment.

One item of note is that the 911 calls during the 2020 pandemic year were only reduced by about 1,000 calls compared to 2019. The pandemic did not reduce the need from the public for the services provided by 911. The pandemic also brought to the forefront how much staffing could be impacted by these and other types of larger scale events. We have been stating for a few years now that we have a great need for additional staffing and were going to request 3 additional positions for 2021 but postponed that to 2022 because of revenue uncertainties created by the pandemic. We have been greatly impacted with overtime when there is any extended leave and we just have no staffing cushion for emergency situations. Since 1999, we have only increased dispatcher staffing by 6. Our current staffing levels just cannot keep up with the growing populations and the demands that current technology require of dispatch. More current technology provides an abundance of information, but that abundance of information requires extra time from the dispatchers to use those tools and disseminate the information as it is requested. We understand that asking for 3 additional positions is

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a significant increase in cost to our agencies, but we strongly believe it is necessary. Perhaps looking for an additional revenue source in the future would help to alleviate the direct impact on the agency budgets.

Dan McDermott thanked the staff of Prospect for their resilience and commitment during the challenging times that the pandemic has presented. They continue to support this community with the high degree of professionalism that the community has come to expect. He shared information about how Prospect dispatchers are trained to help with survivability of callers in emergent situations. He also shared how the needs and expectations for dispatching Fire/Emergency services seems to change about every 3 months. They are working to continue to monitor those changes and modify their response as needs change.

Executive Sidhu asked if there were any questions for Greg or Dan regarding the information they shared. There were no questions.

**Consolidation Discussion**

Presented by WHAT-COMM Deputy Director Greg Erickson.

This agenda item is being brought forward because of some of the questions that came up at the September 2020 meeting and the desire of some of the Board members to have further discussion regarding this topic. Greg sent out minutes, studies, and other documentation regarding this subject, prior to this meeting; for informational purposes. Greg provided an overview of the topic per Sheriff Elfo's request.

Consolidation has been a topic of discussion from time to time since the split that took place in 1999.

**2004:** The fire department hired a consultant to look at operations and cost recovery and that report also included a brief mention about consolidation.

**2014:** A Space Allocation study was conducted to see if the EOC could house both dispatch groups.

**2016:** The City of Bellingham looked at the potential of building a new facility for What-Comm since the current facility needed some major repairs and we are outgrowing the space. Again, the discussion of consolidation was pursued by the Administrative Board, and pursuit of building a new facility was set aside.

**2017:** The Admin Board hired IXP Consultants to review and prepare a report of 3 potential models for the dispatch centers (status quo, co-location, or consolidation).

**2018:** The consultant reported his findings to the Board at the September 2018 meeting. His findings were that he recommended consolidation as the most efficient model even though it would be "a heavy lift". He wasn't asked to include cost savings in the study, but his research indicated to him that there would not be a lot of immediate cost savings, but consolidation would save cost over time. The Admin Board proposed that a dispatch consolidation working group be created.

**2019:** At the January 2019 meeting there was some discussion and disagreement about the working group be called a consolidation working group. The **consolidation** working group was renamed to Working group to determine the "**most efficient model**". In June of 2019 another meeting was held where it became clear that fire services were not in favor of consolidation and that they did not agree

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that the IXP study fully covered everything it should for the consultant to recommend consolidation. There was a motion and a vote to basically form a group to “review the study of the study”.

2020: In February of 2020 there was a motion and a vote of approval, to terminate the working group and the subject of consolidation was ended.

What has become apparent throughout all of this is that we are not on the same page and that we need to be in order to have unity and to move forward. Greg mentioned how the ups and down of the uncertainty of what will happen has and does take a toll on both dispatch groups. He would like to see some clear direction from the Administrative Board as to what direction we are going.

Prospect Fire Chief Bill Hewett commented on how impactful the uncertainties have been on making long range plans.

Lynden Mayor Korthuis and County Council Member Rud Browne are concerned about what they see as a current reluctance to have the conversation about consolidation. They both believe there are some efficiencies and cost savings that would be achieved by consolidating. City Councilmember Dan Hammill agrees that the conversation regarding consolidation is worth having. Rud Browne mentioned that he doesn't feel we can go to the public with a request for a tax increase until we have truly come up with a best model for services first. Scott Korthuis, Rud Browne and Mel Blankers mentioned that they would be willing to be part of a group to discuss this further. However, both Mel and John Crawford expressed that they believe what we have now is working very well and that it doesn't seem prudent to spend more time and money to pursue consolidation further. Dan Hamill wants to make sure that we address how we provide unarmed responses for certain behavioral health calls as we have further discussions about consolidating (or not) and how we would handle these types of calls.

After some additional discussion, Executive Sidhu asked the Board members if they want to carry this discussion forward, or what should be our next steps?

Scott Korthuis stated that he would like to encourage a sub-group that includes key players and have open discussions regarding all the issues that were brought forward today, including some long-range plans. He believes then some final decisions can be made that everyone can be comfortable with.

There was further discussion about who might be part of a sub-group and a suggestion that another meeting be held to determine that. Executive Sidhu would like to meet at a time when Sheriff Elfo can be present. He would like to see a meeting of the full Board with the only agenda item being to set up a sub-group to discuss and review information further and making a recommendation about consolidating or not. He suggested that a meeting might be held in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of April. At that meeting committee members would be assigned and their task would be defined. Rud Browne asked Executive Sidhu who on his staff they could send their ideas and recommendations to? Executive Sidhu suggested that he could possibly asked Arden to be the person to collect the information. There was no formal motion or decision made about forming a committee or a commitment to a meeting date and time.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 2:17 pm