

Guest column

# Back Mountain would gain from county-wide 911 service

By TED WRIGHT

Realizing it to be in the public interest to provide a toll-free telephone number 911 for any individual within the Commonwealth to gain rapid, direct access to emergency aid, in 1990 the Pennsylvania State Legislature passed and the governor signed into law the Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act of 1990, P.L. 340, No. 78. The Luzerne County Commissioners being in agreement that its residents are entitled to this vital public service have authorized the expansion of its communications center to incorporate a county wide 911 Emergency Services Communications Center.

Every county which surrounds Luzerne is either on line with enhanced 911 or will be in the very near future. For the past two years, during the course of my employment, I have been going into communications centers in many of the counties which surround Luzerne. I have witnessed the intense planning which was required to obtain state approval. I have seen the expansion of the existing communications centers to accommodate the telephone equipment, radio consoles, computers and other auxiliary equipment that is needed to have a first class enhanced 911 service. I have watched the installation and testing of this equipment and the successful solution of problems which developed. I have seen what were originally conceived as insurmountable problems be overcome by a spirit of cooperation by all of the emergency services providers who were involved in these projects.

It may seem possible that Luzerne County is currently the only county in Northeastern Pennsylvania without an approved plan for the implementation of this critical service because certain individuals believe a county-wide 911 communications center can't work here and are saying and doing anything that they can to prevent it from becoming a reality. The size of the area of coverage, population or location of the communications centers are not determinants of success. Economics, planning, engineering and a determination to make the system work are. Los Angeles and New York City, the most populated urban areas in the United States, have established and made centralized communications centers work. Clinton County, one of the least populated counties in Pennsylvania, has made a county wide communications center work. These 911 communications centers are successful because of the hard work and dedication of individuals from the police and fire departments, rescue squads, ambulance services and emergency management agencies who believe that such systems can work. These people sat down and identified their specific needs and problems, made plans, developed strategies and began establishing and updating the communications centers. They were constantly reviewing the progress being made, identifying new problems as they occurred and determining solutions. They overcame the problems and they are continuing with the process today as their systems are operating.

There are many questions to be answered and problems to be resolved before Luzerne County will be able to establish an enhanced 911 communications center. The questions must be researched thoroughly and answered truthfully. The problems must be identified in detail so that

workable solutions can be found. The leaders of the emergency services must put forth an honest effort to do so. Contacting those who have been involved in establishing the systems that are already operating might be a good place to begin. It is likely Lycoming, Clinton and Tioga Counties had many of the same questions and problems when they were starting out several years ago. They may have already established workable solutions to some of the problems facing Luzerne County.

The various print media in the area have published articles and editorials with concerns that an enhanced centralized 911 system may not work in Luzerne County. Why won't it? Could it be that the individuals providing the information to the news media are not very familiar with Act 78 and its regulations for the establishment of 911 communications centers? It is disturbing that while the news media makes passing statements about the need for a 911 system in Luzerne County they seem to be listening to the nay-sayers and editorializing in their behalf. It appears that the media has failed to do in depth investigations that present both sides of the issue so that there can be a truly informed public. The Back Mountain Communications Center (BMCC) has taken a leading role in trying to prevent the establishment of a county wide system as evidenced by their lawsuit against Luzerne County and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania challenging the provisions of Act 78.

No one can dispute the value of the service that the BMCC has provided over the past several years. However as the "C.B. radios and pockets full of dimes" gave way to newer telephone and radio systems, these systems must give way to the newer electronic communications and computer technology that is available today. A review of some of the issues being raised by those who are against a county wide 911 system is in order. This review will include the intentions of Pa. Act 78, what service the BMCC currently offers, what service is being proposed by Luzerne County and the economics of both. Readers should keep in mind that other opposition groups throughout the county are attempting to raise similar issues that the BMCC is using to attempt to prove that a county wide communications system is not in the best interest of the public. Investigations into their existing systems would probably reveal their arguments are just as weak as those of the BMCC.

Issue #1: Anything that Luzerne County does is mired down with politics and political appointments.

In most cases this can be a valid argument, however in this case, Act 78 has very strict regulations and controls as to the establishment and operation of 911 communications systems. A plan must be developed and submitted to the Department of Community Affairs. Once DCA gives approval the plan is then forwarded to the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency for a second approval. If the plan is rejected it is returned to the county to be revised and the process is repeated until a satisfactory plan is approved. This plan must be very

detailed and has to include information that the equipment to be installed will be adequate to meet the demands of the community and how this equipment will be backed up to keep the center in operation in case of failure. It verifies how the emergency telecommunicators will be trained and qualified to meet the requirements of the Act. It also must include detailed information about the manning of the communications center to insure that the 911 calls are answered within seconds. When the communications center is operating it will be under intense scrutiny by the state agencies to insure the regulations of Act 78 are being complied with.

The BMCC currently is under no obligation to comply with any of these regulations.

Issue #2: Nowhere is it mandated or encouraged to develop a 911 county wide plan in order to implement Act 78.

The preamble to Act 78 states specifically that is the intent of the General Assembly that authority and responsibility for the creation and implementation of a plan establishing operating and maintaining adequate facilities for answering emergency calls and dispatching a proper response to callers needs shall be vested in county government. It further states that each county is encouraged to implement a 911 emergency communications system and to consider maximum integration of telecommunications facilities and capabilities within their planning in order to economize the costs, as well as to effect a more rapid response capability. With that statement it is apparent that the opponents of the county 911 system who are giving information to the news media that centralized communications center is not encouraged by the Act, either they have not read Act 78, don't understand what they have read or may have willfully tried to misinform the public.

Issue # 3: Luzerne County is too large to have a centralized 911 emergency communications center.

As was mentioned earlier, Los Angeles and New York City both have very successful, centralized communications systems. Closer to home Lycoming County, which is very similar to Luzerne County, is on line and operating a centralized county system. While the population base is not as great it is larger geographically, its terrain is similar to Luzerne and it services the communications needs of the City of Williamsport which is similar to Wilkes-Barre.

Issue # 4: The Back Mountain Communications Center already has 911 service so the county system will be duplication of efforts and will result in double taxation.

It should be noted that the BMCC does not provide service for all of the communities considered as part of the Back Mountain. Harveys Lake Boro and Fairmount, Lake and Ross Townships have determined that either they cannot afford the BMCC or that it does not meet their needs. Franklin Twp. is serviced by the Wyoming County 911 Communications Center. There is more to an efficient emergency communications system than just being picking up a phone, dialing 911 and talking to a local person on the

end of the line. It is a system of telephone equipment, specialized radio equipment, computers, highly technical software and standard operating procedures (SOPs) that detail what is to be done during a particular emergency. While the BMCC has some of these items, it lacks the computer equipment and software needed to enhance the system for automatic number identification (ANI) and computer aided dispatch (CAD).

The 911 service that is in place at BMCC is nothing more than a call forwarding system that when dialed is stepped up, at a switching station, to a regular seven digit telephone number. Compared to the equipment and systems that are available today this amounts to little more than "tin cans tied on the end of strings." It is possible that during a high usage telephone service period such as a holiday or during a major storm or disaster a person needing emergency service could receive a recorded message informing them that all the circuits are busy and to call back. The county 911 system will have dedicated trunk lines going directly into the communications center avoiding this problem. There will be redundant back up trunk lines in case the main lines become inoperable. While anything electronic or mechanical can fail, the system planned for the county will be much more reliable than the system at the BMCC.

Last and probably most important, when 911 is activated with the proposed county system an automatic number identification (ANI) computer system will identify the telephone number from where the call originates. This information will then be automatically tied into a computer aided dispatch (CAD) system which will identify the municipality and street address of the origin of the call. This information will appear on a monitor screen at the telecommunicators console. If for some reason the person cannot speak or remain on the phone, the location of the call's origin will have been identified and the police can be dispatched to obtain more information about the emergency and the appropriate emergency response units dispatched.

The BMCC requires two way verbal conversation in order for a person needing assistance to receive any type of emergency response. If a person needing assistance cannot talk to the telecommunicator and give an address where assistance is required there can be no emergency response. The BMCC is not even close to providing the services of the proposed county system.

Issue # 5: Our local dispatchers know the area and therefore can give faster service to those in need of emergency services.

Fact of the matter is the Chief Dispatcher for the Back Mountain Communications Center resides in Pittston Twp. There is also a part time employee who is a full time dispatcher for Wilkes-Barre and resides in the city. End of that argument.

As mentioned above, with automatic number identification (ANI) and computer aided dispatch (CAD) and the technology and equipment available to transmit the information that appears at the telecommunicators console

the communications center could be located and operated efficiently from anywhere in the United States.

Issue # 6: Operation of Back Mountain Communications Center comes at less cost to the taxpayer than the \$1.25 per month (\$15.00 annual) telephone line charge as allowed by Act 78. A review of the BMCC budgets indicated that this is not true, especially for the residents of Dallas Boro. The budgets submitted by Mr. Jeff Box, who is the Manager for Kingston Twp. and Treasurer of the BMCC, have Dallas Boro paying a disproportionate share toward the annual operating costs of the center. The figures are based on the 1990 census and the 1994 and 1995 budgets of the BMCC. With a population of 2,567 people Dallas Boro has 10 per cent of the population (25,367) of the service area covered by the BMCC. Yet out of the \$117,360 that the five municipalities contribute toward the operation of the BMCC, Dallas Boro pays \$27,464 or 23%. With one mill of collectible real estate tax generating \$7,000 the \$27,464 is the equivalent of 4 mills of property tax in Dallas Boro, Kingston Township has 27 per cent of the population (6,763) and pays 27 percent (\$32,798) of the operating costs. Now there's an equitable share of the costs. Dallas Twp. has 30 per cent of the population (7,625) and contributes 27 per cent (\$32,798). Jackson Township has 21 per cent of the population (5,336) and contributes 10 per cent (\$12,150). Lehman Twp. has 12 per cent of the population (3,076) and contributes 10 per cent (\$12,150).

Based on these figures the annual per capita costs for the residents of Dallas Boro to belong to the BMCC is \$10.70. A family of three is paying \$32.10 and a family of four is paying \$42.80. In Kingston Twp. where the per capita cost for the BMCC is only \$4.85, a family of four is paying \$19.40 per year.

Whatever formula Mr. Box uses to determine the municipalities' contributions, what is the justification for the Dallas Boro per capita cost being more than double that of any of the other member municipality's per capita cost?

With the proposed county 911 system, which is technologically far more advanced than the BMCC, a family with one telephone line into their residence will pay a maximum of \$15.00 per year regardless of how many people live in the house. The \$1.25 per month, per phone line charge to pay for the county 911 system is truly a fair-share way of paying for the system as everyone with a phone line will pay. The BMCC is supported by tax dollars and the non-taxable organizations such as schools, colleges and churches and any other similar organizations who use the services rendered by BMCC do so for free. Under Act 78 they will be required to pay their share under the \$1.25 per month line charge.

Issue # 7: Let the Back Mountain Communications Center remain independent; take the money authorized by Act 78 and it will provide enhanced 911 service.

A cost study prepared by a communications consultant has estimated the revenue generated

by the 1.25 per month telephone line charge will be approximately \$194,295. The 1995 budget for the BMCC lists operating costs for the center at \$147,056. That would leave \$47,239 to purchase all of the telephone and computer equipment that would be required to enhance the current system. In addition there would be additional manpower costs to comply with Act 78. How does the BMCC intend to do this without continuing to take money from the municipalities general funds? If they do that it will be double taxation and the cause will be the local elected municipal officials.

The following questions need to be addressed by the Dallas Boro Council and the Back Mountain Communications Center.

Question #1: What is being done to make Dallas Boro's contribution to operate the BMCC more equitable?

Question #2: How much is the lawsuit, which has been instituted with regard to the interpretation of Act 78, going to cost the taxpayers of the member municipalities?

Question #3: If the BMCC is successful in its quest to maintain a separate communications center, how will the center be funded to provide enhanced 911 service?

Question #4: What is the contingency plan in case the Back Mountain Communications Center determines that it cannot afford to operate as an independent center after a few years?

In Luzerne County currently there are projects being planned such as the raising of the dikes, an inflatable dam to form a recreational lake (find me someone who will swim in that river water) and an all purpose arena. Millions of dollars of Luzerne County taxpayer dollars are going to be spent on these projects with the benefits only going to a few. Much of the opposition to the Luzerne County 911 Communications Center is coming from municipalities, such as Wilkes-Barre City and Kingston, which are going to benefit the most from these other projects. If they do not want to go along with the 911 project which will benefit all of the residents of Luzerne County then they shouldn't expect the residents of Luzerne County to pay for the projects will be of little or no benefit to most of us.

This has been written to provide the public with information with regard to the operation and costs of the Back Mountain Communications Center and to show the advantages of the establishment of Luzerne County Emergency 911 Communications Center under Act 78. If the energy of those opposed to such a system can be directed towards solving the problems instead of creating them, Luzerne County will have a first class system. All residents of Luzerne County are entitled to have the benefit of a Luzerne County 911 Emergency Communications System. These systems work all over the country. Hopefully, all residents will be soon served by such a system.

Ted Wright has been a firefighter for 26 years, and is a former chief of the Dallas Fire Department. He is presently fire training supervisor for Bucks County Community College. He lives in Dallas Borough.

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