

Lehman

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with the BMCC. This is strictly economics," he said.

The supervisors, police, fire department and ambulance company met with representatives from the Luzerne County Commissioner's office and Luzerne County Emergency Systems two weeks ago to put their minds at ease and have some of their questions answered.

"They answered every question we had," said Sutton, who believes their answers were consistent with the ones he heard more than two years ago when the county first approached the Back Mountain with a new 911 system. "They gave us as much time as we wanted. I was impressed."

The county asked the board to submit a written copy of all their questions so they may then send the board a written copy of their answers in return to be put on record.

Sutton said, Howard Koehler, police chief, was satisfied with most of the answers to his questions. Sutton could not comment on the fire and ambulance companies' views on the possible switch.

"If what they (the county) say is true, we're going," said Sutton.

"All three of the supervisors are very happy with the BMCC. This is strictly economics."

Ray Iwanowski
Lehman Twp. supervisor



POST PHOTO/RON BARTIZEK

Sign language

Signs have a language all their own, especially when they're placed near one another. A motorist entering Kingston Twp. on Pioneer Ave. could be forgiven for wondering what the asking price is. Township manager Jeff Box assures us the township is not for sale.

911

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smaller than a county given the designation.

It fits the suit, the local comm center hopes to recover the money already collected from charges on Back Mountain phone lines, which could be used to upgrade equipment to meet state recommendations.

Another option is for the BMCC to become a "secondary center" that calls are referred to. In Berks County, all 911 calls go to a main center, but three areas within the county have their own dispatching centers. As soon as it is determined a call is from one of those areas, it is transferred to an operator in the secondary location, along with computer screen full of information. The secondary center then dispatches appropriate emergency personnel.

Jeff Box, secretary of the BMCC, said there are several reasons such an arrangement wasn't in the cards here. First, he said, the county's 911 plan would not guarantee the local center's existence after three years. Also, while the county would have provided some equipment, the BMCC would still have borne most of the expenses.

"If we're going to pay at some point, why not pay for what we're doing now?"

Jeff Box
BMT Comm Center secretary

And BMCC directors weren't confident the county wouldn't ask for more money later on. "It is our fear they will ask for the municipalities to contribute," Box said. "If we're going to pay at some point, why not pay for what we're doing now?"

That's what has happened in Schuylkill County. John Mercuri, director of the county communications center, said the \$1.25 monthly phone line charges don't cover all the center's costs, and they must get funds either from municipal contributions or the county general fund.

Berks County would appear to have the best of both worlds. Bill Rehr, who serves part-time as the county 911 coordinator while holding down the position of chief

of the Reading Fire Department, said there have been no problems with a system that has three secondary centers.

"It's a real simple thing to do," he said. "It works great." Emergency calls for the Reading police department and ambulance service, and for the Boyertown area, are answered at the county center, then transferred to those centers for dispatching.

Rehr said the county system receives 97¢ per phone line and could operate on as little as 60¢. The difference is saved and earmarked to be used to upgrade equipment.

The original plan filed with the state called for six secondary centers in Luzerne County, said Ron Rome, intergovernmental coordinator. But when they saw how much it would cost, all of them except Hazleton dropped out. State regulations require equipment and staffing at higher levels than the potential secondary centers maintain. Kingston Borough has since entered into an agreement with the county to be a non-emergency dispatching center.

Centers

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resident dials 911 the call is handled one of three ways. Medical emergencies are kept on the line, since county dispatchers are trained in Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) and cannot hand off a call to someone who is not. A fire or police call is transferred directly to the Schuylkill Haven center for dispatching. Non-emergency callers are simply given the proper phone number to call directly.

Jay Willard, borough manager, said the borough's solicitor advised them not to challenge the \$1.25 per month phone line charge residents must pay.

Berger, the public works director, said the borough held public meetings to talk about joining the county system, and members of fire and ambulance companies dominated the sessions. He felt more people would have been for the plan but were intimidated by the local emergency personnel.

But Willard said a recent survey showed a majority of support for staying independent.

Schuylkill Haven spends about \$146,000 per year to operate its center, which is staffed 24 hours.

The Schuylkill County system, meanwhile, can't live on the \$1.25 per phone line monthly charge. John Mercuri, the county's director of communications, said funds must be added from municipal contributions or the county general fund. And he agreed that non-emergency calls may be delayed.

"When 911 calls are busy, we don't answer administrative calls," he said, although at other times dispatchers handle barking dog calls and similar non-emergencies.

"You're going to get better communications service from a smaller dispatch center," Mercuri said. "It's a heck of a lot easier to dispatch one community than a county."

One of the advantages county systems should have is access to medical and other information that appears instantly on the dispatcher's computer screen. The information is linked to phone numbers, so as a call comes in the computer searches a database for records. But it's not that simple, Mercuri said. "It's very difficult to maintain records," he said. The county sends forms out once a year for people to update their information. He said some counties have resorted to hiring outside firms to gather the data.

"It's a real simple thing to do this way. It works great."

Bill Rehr
Berks County 911 coordinator

The best of both worlds?

Berks County was one of the first to institute county-wide 911, starting in 1989 before the state got involved. With no phone line surcharges to foot the bill, the county floated a bond to pay for the system, on the expectation it would be reimbursed once state legislation passed.

Instead of trying to force a single system, county officials met with every emergency service in the county, and began with a system that had multiple secondary centers. Three of them remain today, two in the city of Reading.

All 911 calls in the county are received at the main center. Calls for the Reading police or ambulance departments, or for the Boyertown area, are immediately transferred to secondary centers. A computer screen filled with information is also transferred directly to the secondary dispatcher.

"Since we collect the surcharge, we put the equipment in," said Bill Rehr, who serves part time as the county 911 coordinator and full time as Reading's fire chief. Each secondary center has "ANI, ALY" computer screens that display information about the caller, a printer and special phone lines to handle the transfers.

"It's a real simple thing to do this way," Rehr said. "It works great."

The Boyertown center is similar to the Back Mountain Communications Center, only a little smaller. It serves four police departments, five municipalities, five fire departments, one ambulance service and the Salvation Army in the greater Boyertown area, which has a population of about 20,000.

Jeff Bealar, chief dispatcher since 1994, said the county center confirms the information before transferring the call. "They verify the location and whether it's police, fire or ambulance," he said. The county dispatcher will stay on the line if Emergency Medical Dispatch is needed.

Bealar said people in the area have learned that 911 is only for emergencies, and non-emergency calls come directly into his center.

One town threatened to pull out of the local system, he said, citing the cost of phone charges plus support for the Boyertown center, but public opinion was against them.

The Boyertown center has an annual operating budget of \$183,000. Bealar is trying to add more dispatchers at peak times, although he said the county will pick up any overload of calls.

While he would welcome the addition of the secondary centers to the county system — "a couple of centers eventually closed," he said — Rehr understands the appeal of smaller centers. "They know people by name, and that's worth something," he said.

Besides working well, the Berks County system uses money sparingly. The county still collects the 97¢ per phone line charge it started with, even though it could apply to raise the fee to \$1.25 per month. Rehr says the system can run on 60¢ per month, and the excess is put away into a capital fund. That money will be used to upgrade equipment, which will soon allow the system to work with cellular phone calls and global positioning equipment.

Perhaps the most extreme example of multiple answering points has been in Allegheny County. Marko Bourne, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, said the county's first 911 plan had 47 answering points, and that didn't include the city of Pittsburgh, which had its own 911 system. Bourne said the county's new scheme has only seven answering points, including in Pittsburgh.

In Luzerne County, only Hazleton is left from six secondary centers in the county's original proposal. Kingston Borough has agreed to be a dispatching site for non-emergency calls only, and the Back Mountain Communications Center bid to remain independent will be heard in a Harrisburg courtroom Oct. 6.

"I can guarantee they won't be able to respond to non-emergency calls."

Marlin Berger
Schuylkill Haven public works director

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