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Suburban officials discuss sharing services

Joint dispatching center interests townships, cities

By Dean Narciso

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Spurred by the desire to contain costs, a group of seven townships and cities - including Dublin, Grove City, Hilliard, Upper Arlington and Worthington - met yesterday to brainstorm setting up a joint communications center for their police and fire agencies.

But some agencies that already handle dispatching for several jurisdictions weren't invited.

Organizers said they wanted to meet with agencies that have like-minded dispatching philosophies.

"The last thing I want to do is upset someone because they weren't invited," said Hilliard Police Chief Doug Francis, who set up the meeting with Norwich Township Fire Chief Dave Long. "We have a concept, and we were looking at interest in the concept."

The response "was very favorable," Francis said.

Gov. John Kasich has said that cities and townships can compensate for his proposed cuts in funding for local governments by working together to save money.

There are at least three local examples of jurisdictions that work together on dispatching.

The Metropolitan Emergency Communications Center, developed seven years ago, handles the dispatching for seven eastern Franklin County fire departments.

Aided by \$3.5 million in federal and local grants, Jefferson, Mifflin, Plain, Truro and Violet townships, plus Gahanna, Whitehall and the state fire marshal, operate under one roof with one set of dispatchers and shared costs and computers.

Dublin, Delaware County and Worthington have a similar agreement for police and fire dispatching. And the Franklin County sheriff's communications center serves the sheriff's office, 12 other police agencies and one fire department.

Lt. Karen Cotner, who is in charge of the sheriff's communication center, had no idea the agencies were meeting.

"I'm surprised to hear of a meeting that I wouldn't be involved with. We take the second-largest number of service and 911 calls, next to Columbus," she said.

Collaboration can be politically sensitive because union wages, benefits and local autonomy are involved.

"Anytime you're getting into politics ... typically, politicians like to be involved in their own area," said Cotner.

Elected officials also weren't included in yesterday's meeting, said sources who didn't want to be named.

Mike Grossman, chief of the Metropolitan communications center, said today's economy requires agencies to move swiftly without regard to politics and hurt feelings.

"We need true collaboration without compromise," Grossman said. "You've got to agree to work together, and you've got to go do it."

Grossman wonders why agencies don't combine with his group. "Why copy what we're doing? Why not join?" he said.

That's one possibility, Francis said. "In the long run, there are definitely cost-saving possibilities."

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