

CONSOLIDATION OF PUBLIC SAFETY DISPATCH SYSTEMS

“HE WHO WILL NOT ECONOMIZE WILL HAVE TO AGONIZE.”- CONFUCIUS

SUMMARY

This report is an investigation of the feasibility of consolidating public safety dispatch services in the cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach.

INTRODUCTION

Because of slow economic times and shrinking revenues nearly all jurisdictions in San Luis Obispo County are struggling to maintain viable budgets. The 2012/2013 Grand Jury elected to investigate the possibility of combining public safety dispatch systems in the cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach. In February 2011, the cities of Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande reviewed the possibility of a consolidation of the police departments in their cities. Arroyo Grande contracted with a private firm to conduct an investigation into the pros and cons of that action. The resulting proposal was presented to the Grover Beach City Council and after consideration of the plan, Grover Beach voted not to participate.

The 2012/2013 Grand Jury reviewed previous studies relating to the possibility of a consolidation of the police departments in Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach, and chose to narrow the focus to consolidation of dispatch services.¹

HISTORY

Consolidation of services has been considered by governmental agencies for years, and can be very appealing for many reasons. Small governmental agencies throughout the country have

¹www.sanluisobispo.com/2012/02/26/1964939/arroyo-grande-grover-beach-city

often considered ways to reduce costs and improve efficiency through the consolidation of services.

There have been many studies in small police agencies with an anticipated goal of reducing response time, cutting overtime, lowering operating costs and improving the overall efficiency of the department. Those who favor consolidation look to improving resources, the quality of services, utilization of manpower, flexibility to meet demands, training opportunities, and management and supervision of their agencies. Consolidation is most attractive to smaller agencies, of which there are over 14,000 police agencies in communities with populations under 50,000 throughout the United States. Those who represent smaller agencies are concerned about redundancy of services and costs, and the waste of manpower in time and services as they duplicate each agency's effort.

Those who are opposed to consolidation fear losing control of their agencies, reducing their communities' identities, and reducing supervision and oversight in those agencies covering several jurisdictions. There is also a concern that the personal element of "our police department" will be lost. Response time may not be improved and in some cases consolidation may be more expensive because of increased costs of salaries and benefits. Those who hold a negative view are concerned that some personnel will be threatened by consolidation, for example, senior officers who feel they now have to report to a new supervisor. They are also concerned about the possibility of increased costs, particularly start-up costs, and the cost of reorganization.

Additional concerns include:

- standardizing equipment,
- location where the agency will be housed,
- need for a new facility,
- general resistance to change,
- officers who feel threatened by a possible loss of status or ability to be promoted and
- question of who will govern the agency after consolidation.

Consolidation is a matter of degree. There is the possibility of consolidating certain functional services such as communications, dispatch and records. As previously noted, there are over 14,000 smaller police agencies, many with inadequate numbers of personnel or budgets to sustain their operations. Consolidation of some services may be the answer to their problem.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) notes that a review of the literature on the subject of consolidation indicates several positives:

- a greater capacity to respond to the need for services,
- a greater efficiency and flexibility resulting in a savings of money to the agency, and
- improved salaries, benefits, and advancement opportunities for personnel in some cases..

Others fear a loss of personal interaction with other agencies, and a general fear of parochialism manifested at the city council level by individual council members or mayors.

The Grand Jury was aware of the fact that the Grover Beach City Council had rejected a proposal to consolidate their police department with that of Arroyo Grande. It was also aware that the police departments of both cities were in favor of a portion of that proposal – namely, consolidating dispatch services only. The Grand Jury was also aware that an additional possibility existed to contract such dispatch services with the SLO County Sheriff. Based on the above, and in the belief that certain efficiencies might be obtained, the Grand Jury initiated an investigation into the feasibility of such a consolidation with the intent of reporting their conclusions to each city for consideration.

METHOD

The Grand Jury's inquiry consisted of the following:

- A review of studies pertaining to the possibility of consolidating police services in the cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach.
- An interview with Ian Parkinson, SLO County Sheriff

- An interview with Steven Annabali, Chief of Police Arroyo Grande Police Department.
- Interview with Jim Copsey, Chief of Police Grover Beach Police Department.
- Interview with Steven Adams, City Manager City of Arroyo Grande.
- Interview with Robert Perrault, City Manager City of Grover Beach.
- Interview with Robert Lewin, CAL FIRE Chief.
- Interview with Joel Aranaz, Five Cities Fire Authority Chief.
- Follow-up letters to city managers to obtain budget information.

NARRATIVE

The Grand Jury met with various city, county and state officials to discuss the possibility of a merger of dispatch systems in Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande:

The SLO County Sheriff: Members of the Grand Jury met with Sheriff Ian Parkinson (Sheriff) to discuss the possibility of a merger of dispatch systems in Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande, or the possibility of the cities contracting with the Sheriff for such services.

Sheriff Parkinson advised that there is much duplication in management, administrative services, and personnel costs within each agency that provides its own dispatch systems.

Sheriff Parkinson is aware of the political ramifications of possible consolidation, and advised that the City of Grover Beach had rejected the proposal to combine police departments with Arroyo Grande. He submitted to the City Manager of Grover Beach a proposal to provide

dispatch services to the city on a contract basis. Parkinson believes that the city would save over \$150,000 the first year and in excess of \$170,000 a year thereafter if they contracted for dispatch with the Sheriff's Office.

He stated that if Arroyo Grande would join Grover Beach in combining dispatch services and contracting with the Sheriff's Department, the dispatch system would operate out of the facility on Kansas Avenue in San Luis Obispo. This facility has recently been upgraded with new hardware and software.

Sheriff Parkinson pointed out that when a city with limited resources has to fill in personnel to cover vacations, sick days and leaves of absence, then the city incurs added costs or runs short on personnel and services. Upon consolidation the sheriff would be obligated to fill these positions thereby maintaining a constant level of service.

There are other services that could be considered under a contract in the future, such as Vice, Gang Abatement and Crime Lab. Sheriff Parkinson informed the Grand Jury that he has had discussions with other cities in the county about similar service contracts, but at the present time none have materialized.

Sheriff Parkinson believes that if a consolidation occurs, the city councils will have a better idea of the actual advantages and the cost savings, as well as being able to better manage their law enforcement budgets.

Sheriff Parkinson stated that one of the stumbling blocks to consolidation of dispatch will be working out the issues related to fire dispatch, which at the present time has separate issues with which to deal; however, he feels that these issues can all be worked out with a centralized dispatch system.

The City Manager of Grover Beach: The City Manager of Grover Beach discussed the initial costs to the City of Grover Beach. He was particularly concerned over start-up costs and the unfunded liability the city would have for the retirement systems. He advised that there have

been numerous studies regarding the subject, and the initial studies considered the possibility of combining the police department with Arroyo Grande.

He advised that the city has looked at the possibility of consolidation of dispatch services and noted how this would affect the fire services that provide dispatch for Grover Beach and Oceano.

The Grand Jury was advised that many citizens prefer to have their own agency. They were told that community members best identify with this local police department. Some individuals have expressed concerns about shifting dispatch services to the City of Arroyo Grande.

The Grand Jury discussed with the City Manager the economic situation in Grover Beach and the cuts that have taken place over the past three years. When asked if the city had considered the possibility of contracting with the Sheriff's Department for dispatch, he advised that it had, but he could not recall the details of the discussion.

The Grover Beach Chief of Police: The Grover Beach Chief of Police advised that the police department is understaffed by three officers. They handle their own dispatch at the present time. He stated that overtime is very low and when not providing dispatch services employees work in Records.

The Chief felt that consolidation of dispatch would be more effective for the community. He thought the issue of consolidating both departments was a dead issue, but dispatch for all agencies in the Five Cities area would be effective if it included Fire Departments as well.

The City Manager of the City of Arroyo Grande: The City Manager of Arroyo Grande stated that he was in favor of consolidation. He felt that there would be savings in personnel costs and benefits, particularly in the area of dispatch. He said that there used to be some negative attitudes about consolidation, and particularly consolidation of police departments in Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach. He believes that many of the concerns have been overcome, particularly negative attitudes towards the Sheriff's Department.

The City Manager advised that the City of Arroyo Grande has cut back on staff, has completed at least three rounds of organizational restructuring and consolidated city services where possible. He stated that the city has severely cut back city services and combined operations in several departments.

He advised that the city has just begun informal talks with Sheriff Parkinson. In conclusion, he predicted that there will be a merger of some city services in the future but he did not know when that would take place.

Arroyo Grande Chief of Police: The Arroyo Grande Chief of Police believes that there is great interest in consolidating the dispatch services in Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach. He indicated that the interest was regarding the possibility of contracting with the Sheriff for such services. He thought that the plan was viable.

The Chief said the benefits of consolidation are:

- He could put more officers on the street,
- There would be a reduction in cost, and
- It would reduce or eliminate duplication of services.

He stated that fire dispatch continues to be a problem. Five Cities Fire Authority and CAL FIRE are separate entities and would have to be involved in any potential changes in the fire dispatch.

The Chief is aware that the respective city councils would have to approve any such contract, but he believes the problems can be worked out. He discussed the studies that have been done on consolidation of the police agencies and he believes that if there is any consolidation it should start with dispatch.

The Chief of CAL FIRE : The Grand Jury interview with the Chief of CAL FIRE resulted in comments similar to those made by the police chiefs and the city managers. He felt that the

consolidation of police dispatch was very doable and that the Sheriff's Department would be the appropriate agency with which to contract. He felt that Five Cities Fire Authority would have to be involved if there were changes proposed for fire dispatch.

He advised that Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande already dispatch for fire service. He stated that working with the Sheriff's Department and consolidating resources would bring cost benefits to all agencies involved. He remarked that the fire dispatch issues would take some time to work out but that it could be done.

Chief Lewin commented that CAL FIRE already provides dispatch services to Cambria, Templeton, San Miguel, Santa Margarita and Cayucos without any problems or conflict.

The Chief of Five Cities Fire Authority: Five Cities Fire Authority Chief's interview revealed that Five Cities Fire Authority serves Grover Beach, Oceano and Arroyo Grande. There are two dispatch centers, one in Arroyo Grande and one in Grover Beach that also serves Oceano. The Chief was concerned that the computers in each city are not compatible with each other. On occasion when a call comes in to Grover Beach and they are not the closest fire service, the calls have to be rerouted resulting in a delay in response time.²

The Chief advised that he always wants to have the closest unit respond without the time delay, and if there were a single dispatch center this problem would be resolved. The Chief is very much in favor of a consolidated dispatch system. However, he is concerned as to who would control the system. Although he believes that the Sheriff is in favor of CAL FIRE handling dispatch for fire services, he does not believe that CAL FIRE is interested in handling the dispatch system for Grover Beach, Arroyo Grande and Oceano.

The Chief sees no reason to have three fire chiefs in the three jurisdictions, and the cost factor may dictate that consolidation of dispatch as well as some command personnel may have to take

² Five Cities Fire Authority

place for economic reasons. The Chief was not in favor of CAL FIRE taking over the dispatch systems.

The Chief is in favor of consolidation and believes that the service level to local citizens and safety for fire fighters would improve.

CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing the various studies and interviews, the Grand Jury concluded there is consensus among the agencies that some consolidation of police and fire dispatch is feasible and desirable.

FINDINGS

- F1 There is duplication of police and fire dispatch services in Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach.
- F2 Service levels to the citizens of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach are at risk regarding fire protection because of computer incompatibility.
- F3 There are potentially significant future cost savings to the cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach in joining dispatch services after the first year of combining equipment expenditure.
- F4 Five Cities Fire Authority does not want CAL FIRE's involvement with the use and allocation of the Five Cities Fire Authority equipment.
- F5 The County Sheriff's Office is prepared to handle both police and fire dispatches for Cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach.
- F6 The reluctance to consolidate dispatch by Five Cities Fire Authority and CAL FIRE has brought action to a stalemate in finding answers to the dispatch issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1 The City Councils of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach should consider consolidating the public safety dispatch systems of their respective cities.
- R2 All city law enforcement, city managers, Sheriff, Five Cities Fire Authority and CAL FIRE should join in meeting with an independent facilitator to finalize consolidation of dispatch by contracting dispatch services with the Sheriff's Department.
- R3 Five Cities Fire Authority and CAL FIRE should work with an independent facilitator to develop a written contract defining fire services to be performed and the use of each department's assets.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The City of Arroyo Grande is required to respond to Findings 1-3 and 5 and Recommendations 1 and 2.. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The City of Arroyo Grande Police Department is required to respond to Findings 1, 3 and 5 and Recommendations 1 and 2. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The Arroyo Grande City Manager is required to respond to Findings 1-3 and 5 and Recommendations 1 and 2 The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The City of Grover Beach is required to respond to Findings 1-3 and 5-6 and Recommendations 1 and 2. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court

by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The City of Grover Beach Police Department is required to respond to Findings 1, 3 and 5 and Recommendations 1 and 2. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The Grover Beach City Manager is required to respond to Findings 1-3 and 5 and Recommendations 1 and 2. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The Five Cities Fire Authority is required to respond to Finding 4 and 6 and Recommendations 2 and 3. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

CAL FIRE is requested to respond to Finding 4 and 6 and Recommendations 2 and 3. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

The San Luis Obispo County Sheriff is required to respond to Finding 5 and Recommendation 2. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Superior court by July 29, 2013. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Barry T. LaBarbera Superior Court of California 1035 Palm Street Room 355 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403