Committee of the Whole Meeting on Potential PSAP Outsourcing– January 28, 2020

Sheri Theis, Circleville City Council

**Opening and History**

I would like to welcome you all this evening. I am Sheri Theis, and together with Michelle Blanton, we are the PSAP Fact Finding Committee. Our task is to present this information as clearly and completely as possible. The most important fact to remember is that Council, the Administration and the Safety Forces all have the same goal, and that is providing the best safety services to the citizens of Circleville. To quote Mayor McIlroy, “We are all Team Circleville.”

For anyone who may not be familiar with it, PSAP is an acronym that stands for Public Safety Answering Point, P-S-A-P, and it is the call center that receives 9-1-1 emergency calls for police, fire and ambulance services. We currently have two PSAPs in Pickaway County, one at the Sheriff’s Office and one at the Circleville Police Station.

Last August Michelle and I were appointed to gather the information necessary to evaluate if it is in the best interests of the city to outsource our 9-1-1 dispatching or to maintain our City PSAP. We toured our dispatching center and met with members of the Police Department, talked to the Fire Chief, Mayor and Safety Director, as well as several County Officials. We have reviewed emails and correspondence between the City and the County officials, researched the minutes of the 9-1-1 Commission meetings and the documents of the official Pickaway County 9-1-1 Plan.

Financial information was provided by the Safety Director and the Police Chief, who compiled a cost comparison of keeping the City PSAP versus outsourcing to the County. We also requested county 9-1-1 fund records and got additional records from the Mayor and the City Auditor. Michelle and I met with David Board from Central Square Technologies, who provided cost projections for the Dispatching hardware and software.

From this information we organized a history of the interactions concerning 9-1-1 service in Pickaway County and Circleville. I felt that it was important for each Council member to have a complete understanding of how we got to this point. The timeline was emailed for your review and I will not go through all of it, just give a brief summary.

The Wireless Enhanced 9-1-1 Plan was first formed in 2006. Discussions of consolidating the two PSAPs began in 2013, with the Commissioners recommending a new, free-standing 9-1-1 Dispatch Center. The 9-1-1 Dispatch Advisory Committee was formed, and in 2014 unanimously agreed on consolidation. From there, things went downhill. Over the last six years disputes ensued, systems crashed, lawyers were involved, and enormous bills were paid to keep the city dispatch center operating.

The County receives wireless 9-1-1 funding from the State. In the last year or so Pickaway County built a brand new, state-of-the-art PSAP at the Sheriff’s Office with four workstations and wiring in place for a fifth station if needed. Council toured the County PSAP last February. The County has also established a backup PSAP at the County Emergency Management Office. And that brings us to where we are today.

**State of Dispatching**

9-1-1 calls made from a landline originating in the City go directly to the Circleville Police Dispatchers, who send out either police, fire or emergency medical services. 9-1-1 calls made from a cell phone originating in the City are answered by the County Dispatchers, then transferred to the City Dispatchers, who send out the appropriate people to help. According to the Safety Director, time is lost in this transfer. Response times to 9-1-1 calls made from cell phones in the city would be faster if the County directly dispatched the City safety forces. Faster response times equal better service.

The Chart illustrates the number of calls for service to the Circleville PSAP for the past three years, broken down into 9-1-1 calls and non-emergency calls to 474-8888. As you can see, 9-1-1 calls represent about 20 to 25% of total calls. In 2019, of the 12,707 non-emergency calls, about 2/3 were calls coming into the station on the 474-8888 number. Other non-emergency calls include officer initiated calls, on-station calls, radio calls, alarm panel calls.

In 2019 there were 4,054 9-1-1 calls that originated in the city. Of that number, 29% were calls from landlines directly to City Dispatchers. 71% were cell phone calls or Internet calls that were answered by the County Dispatchers and then transferred to City Dispatchers for service. Therefore, 71% of the city’s 9-1-1 calls would be dispatched more quickly if the County Dispatchers radioed the police or EMS directly.

In 2018, a government survey found that almost 55% of households nationwide use cell phones exclusively. Another 36% have both a mobile phone and a working landline. Just over 5% rely entirely on a landline. The fact is, more and more of our citizens are using cell phones and the number of households with landlines is decreasing, so the percentage of 9-1-1 calls made from cell phones will increase.

The Pickaway County PSAP handles a larger volume of calls, and it is growing every year. These numbers include 9-1-1 calls from cell phones originating in the city. Lt. Rhoades says that, “over the next five years with stable growth these figures could realistically approach 30,000 calls for service per year or higher.” The 25,283 calls in 2019 include Circleville cellular calls. If the County had also dispatched the city’s landline calls, the total County calls for service would have been 26,455. Circleville 9-1-1 calls would have represented 15% of the County’s total calls.

The technology of 9-1-1 dispatching systems is complex and expensive. The Circleville PSAP is using Emergitech Software, which is an older system that will need to be upgraded. The hardware needs an emergency equipment repair right now. The Police Chief has filed a purchase order request for $250,000 to keep our system running.

The Pickaway County PSAP is running the next generation 9-1-1 Zurcher software, which has capabilities that the City software does not. Their platform supports texting during 9-1-1 calls, which could make a difference in the case where an intruder was in the house and the citizen was afraid to speak out loud to the dispatcher. The County software is also capable of transmitting photos and video, so police responding to the call could potentially see what is happening at the scene. According to Lt. Rhoads, the County is currently taking bids to contract with a company to process the calls so that the service can be activated. They expect to be able to take 9-1-1 calls with text and video within the next six months or so. It is exciting that this potentially life-saving service will soon be available to the people of Pickaway County.

**Financial State of the City**

The financial state of our City is this: Our expenditures exceed our revenue. Due to loss of manufacturing, cuts in State funding, less estate tax, less personal property tax, and municipal fines being down, City revenues have been stagnant since 2008.

Circleville runs on income tax, which was recently increased to 2.5%. Of that revenue, 62% is dedicated to the Police, Fire and EMS. WE SUPPORT OUR SAFETY FORCES. 22% goes to Municipal Court and Capital expenses like roads and building maintenance, which leaves 16% to operate the city. That means that the Administration, Council, the Service Department and Parks all operate on only 16% of our income tax revenue.

The State Auditor recommends that each fund have reserves that equal three months of operating expenses. The City has not been able to meet this goal. Currently the General Fund has about one month in reserves. Fund 212, one of our Safety funds, reached such low levels last year that there was not enough money to cover expenses and some bills could not be paid for several months.

Dispatching technology is very expensive, both to purchase and to maintain. In 2013 the system had a major crash which required $250,000 to repair. According to Chief Baer, from the fall of 2015 to the spring of 2016 there were ongoing problems that cost thousands in overtime for the supervisors. April 2016 brought a catastrophic failure that again cost $250,000 to fix. And in 2019, on what seems to be a three-year cycle, the City Dispatching technology has reached a point where it will cost ANOTHER quarter of a million dollars to maintain.

The City’s 9-1-1 ANI ALI hardware is considered a liability due to the age of the system, according to David Board of Central Square Technologies, the company that provides the service. It is outdated and finding spare parts that are tested and guarantee to work is nearly impossible. The software also will need an expensive upgrade in the future. The Chief and Safety Director have reported to Council that the Circleville PSAP needs this immediate emergency repair in order to continue to operate. In their words there is a “High threat to public Safety.”

So how have other small cities handled the high costs of dispatching? Well, many cities have chosen to consolidate. The Northwest Regional Emergency Communications Center in Dublin dispatches for Dublin, Hilliard and Upper Arlington Police as well as Washington Township, Norwich Township and Upper Arlington fire departments. The Metropolitan Emergency Communications Consortium in Gahanna provides dispatch services to 24 fire departments and 13 law enforcement agencies for many government entities across Franklin, Fairfield and Licking counties.

According to the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, this collaboration has allowed for improved emergency response times using state-of-the-art technology that offers shared, real-time information and access to all emergency vehicles at once, getting first responders to residents faster, when time is most critical. Consolidation shares costs, saving taxpayers millions of dollars while providing the opportunity to benefit from the latest in technology, medical direction and other services.

The State of Ohio’s Department of Administrative Services hired the L.R. Kimball Company to prepare a report on Public Safety Answering Point Consolidation. The study concludes that having one PSAP per county is optimal, with additional PSAPs only in cities with populations over 100,000. I quote, “Maintaining consistent operating standards, staff training levels and technological sophistication is far more difficult for those PSAPs that must rely on a smaller population and tax base to remain viable.”

This very thorough 51 page report lists two main reasons for consolidation, service level improvements and cost savings. Improvements in service come from eliminating the transfer of calls, which improves response time and lowers the potential for human or technology errors. Service is also improved by having a county-wide awareness of the workload and deployment of field personnel. Cost savings result mainly from the elimination of redundant and expensive technology, although the savings are not immediate.

It is a fact that we citizens of Circleville, who support the city with our income tax dollars, are also Pickaway County citizens. We support Pickaway County with our property tax and sales tax dollars. Our taxes are being used to fund two PSAPs. Circleville residents are paying for a dispatching center at the Police station and another at the Sheriff’s Office.