

Coping with consolidaton; dealing with dispatch: Bethalto adapting to new 911 rules

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BETHALTO – With 911 consolidation being the law of the land in Illinois, many Madison County law enforcement agencies are finding ways to adapt, including the Bethalto Police Department.

Bethalto Police Chief Craig Welch said his agency will be consolidating with the Wood River Police Department as well as the East Alton Police Department. Through Madison County's current consolidation plans, the current 16 public service answering points (PSAPs) will be diminished to eight, located in Alton, Granite City, Pontoon Beach, Edwardsville, Glen Carbon, Wood River, Collinsville and the Madison County Sheriff's Office. Those plans, however, are currently struggling through the court system, as St. Clair County is suing Madison County for the ability to intervene in Madison County's plans, especially in areas where the counties meet, such as Collinsville and Madison.

Under current procedure, an emergency caller in Bethalto would reach a dispatcher physically located in Bethalto. Welch said the dispatch center in the village he serves is designed for five employees, but has operated under four, because overtime is cheaper to pay than the salary of a fifth person. That number will soon decrease to three with the retirement of one of them.

With the new changes, however, Bethalto will no longer have a PSAP.

“Bethalto is losing its PSAP, so it will no longer be taking 911 calls,” Welch said. “It is outside of our control. We don't like it, but we have to deal with it.”

With the three remaining dispatchers working toward consolidation into the Wood River PSAP, Welch said many of their outside responsibilities beyond dispatching will need to be done by someone else. Outside the skilled labor of emergency dispatching – a field which requires constant training – dispatchers at the Bethalto Police Department also worked in reception and clerical work for the department.

To replace those workers in the absence of dispatchers and a PSAP, the Bethalto Police Department and the Village of Bethalto is looking to hire civilian police aides. These workers would have the primary function of acting as a receptionist for anyone seeking village programs – from police to public works and everything in between.

“Their primary function is to act as a receptionist for all civilians seeking government services in the village,” Welch said. “Other core jobs would be to monitor video systems, which would include monitoring the video feed of jails. They would also have to do the required 30-minute physical checks of prisoners. They would also be assisting the administrative secretary at records keeping at a level at which she is comfortable. She would be their supervisor in that regard.”

Bethalto Mayor Alan Winslow plans on hosting a public forum for this proposed addition of civilian police aides this coming Monday. Based on the hearing, the addition of these workers could come to a village vote by the October village board meeting. Welch said the program is based on one currently in operation in Swansea.

Calls to the Swansea Police Chief regarding that program have not been returned at this time, but Welch said the St. Clair County municipality's program is more extensive than Bethalto's would be. Aides there are full-time, and Bethalto's would be part-time, with no more than 29 hours a week expected. Welch said the job would be great for college students and the retired or semi-retired looking to make additional income without the major responsibilities of a full-time job.

When these changes would be implemented would be whenever the court system sorts out the current case pending between St. Clair and Madison Counties. Madison County 911 Interim Director Dana Burris said the plan was submitted to the state months ago. Consolidation was supposed to occur on July 1, 2018, but that date has come and gone with little changes.

“Plans have been submitted to the state for months, we've been wanting it to go through the court system,” she said. “Our consolidation plan has not been approved, until it goes through the courts.”

Because of that, Bethalto's dispatchers, while mostly prepared for consolidation (they are awaiting a few issues with telecommunications to ensure a smooth transition with Wood River), are currently awaiting that case as well. East Alton Police Department will be moving to Wood River as a backup 911 dispatch center by Oct. 1.

“Whenever there is a 911 call, if the agency that receives the call is not available, it automatically goes to a backup police department and 911 system,” Burris said.