



**Subject: Consolidation of Emergency Services Dispatch**

**To: Council**

**From: Community Safety & Enforcement Department**

Report Number: 2021-201

Meeting Date: July 12, 2021

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### **Recommendation:**

That Community Safety and Enforcement Department Report 2021-201 be received;

That Council authorize the Fire Chief to investigate potential options for a dispatching service utilizing the Department's current analog radio system to replace the current service agreement with the City of St Catharines that expires on December 31, 2022; and

That Council authorize the Fire Chief to further investigate the option of switching to a digital format utilizing the P25 system and joining the consolidated dispatching system within the Niagara Region.

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### **Purpose:**

To provide Council with an update on a proposed consolidated dispatch centre that includes; Niagara Regional Police Service, Niagara Emergency Medical Services and other municipal fire departments in Niagara. Furthermore, the Fire Chief is requesting authorization to begin looking at all options for the continuation of dispatch services which include maintaining the existing analog system or switching to a digital format.

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### **Background:**

Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services currently uses an analog radio system that has one antenna site at the fire hall and another at the Port Colborne Hospital which serves as the backup location. 911 calls are answered by St. Catharines Fire Service at their dispatching center located on Merritt Street in St. Catharines. On receipt of a 911 call, communication staff generates an alarm notifying Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services personnel of the call's location and type of emergency.

The existing analog system has had several upgrades over the last 6 years. Including the addition of the backup antenna at the Port Colborne Hospital, along with the addition of mobile extenders in the apparatus. However, the four Motorola MTR2000 repeaters within the system have reached the end of life and are no longer supported by Motorola. Replacement costs are estimated at \$15,000 per repeater.

St. Catharines Fire Service has given verbal notice that they will no longer provide dispatching services to fire service customers, including Port Colborne, after December 31, 2022.

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## **Discussion:**

In Canada, 911 technology is governed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and in Ontario the 911 infrastructure is provided provincially by Bell Canada. Current 911 technology is voice analogue-based with minimal data and limits the amount and type of information shared across the 911 infrastructure. New technology known as Next Generation 911 is being implemented nationally through the CRTC. The introduction of Next Generation 911 technology will greatly improve 911 services in an increasingly wireless mobile society as it is based on an Emergency Services IP Network operating on an Internet Protocol platform to serve as a national Internet Protocol platform-enabled emergency network. This platform enhances emergency number services to create a faster, more resilient system that allows voice, photos, videos and text messages to flow seamlessly from the public to and across the 911 network.

The CRTC has mandated that all provinces, municipalities and their public safety answering point providers are required to meet the Next Generation 911 standards no later than March 31, 2024, at which time the legacy systems will be disconnected. In Niagara, this will require significant technological changes to local emergency dispatch services.

Currently in Niagara, five separate emergency service dispatch centres exist. These include: St Catharines Fire, Tillsonburg Fire, Niagara Falls Fire, Niagara Regional Police Services and Niagara Emergency Medical Services. The consolidated dispatch proposal would have all but Niagara Emergency Medical Services being dispatched by the proposed new dispatching centre. The proposed go-live date for the transition to the Next Generation 911 compliant, consolidated dispatching service is March 31, 2024.

Current discussions with stakeholders suggest that to be part of the consolidated dispatch, any users on the analog system will be forced to switch to the digital format. As earlier stated, Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services is currently operating on analog.

The recommended digital platform is the P25 system currently used by Niagara Regional Police Services and approximately six fire departments in the Region. Digital radio testing was completed in Port Colborne in March 2021 by Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services. The P25 system worked very well within the City limits of Port Colborne. The digital testing of the rural areas appeared to provide better service than the existing analog system.

The switch to a consolidated dispatching system utilizing the digital platform is Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services staff's preferred outcome. As little to no research and development is being done to further analog systems, the eventual transition to digital is inevitable. Also, there are currently interoperability issues within the municipal fire services in Niagara. In mutual aid scenarios, responding fire departments can easily be linked to the incident's channel on the digital platform.

During stakeholder engagement, multiple funding models were discussed. At this time Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services staff have not received any indication of the funding model to be chosen by the Region if the proposal proceeds. Regional Council report PHD-08-2021 "Consolidation of Niagara's Emergency 911 Communication Services" states that economic evaluations still need to be completed with the hopes of those reports being completed by the end of 2021.

With the Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services service agreement with St. Catharines for dispatching expiring on December 31, 2022 and a Next Generation 911 implementation date of March 2024, staff must investigate alternative arrangements to guarantee continuation of dispatching services.

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## **Financial Implications:**

At this current time, financial implications cannot be forecasted. Funding models and actually knowing who will be providing dispatch services as of January 1, 2023, is not known. Full financial implications will be brought forward when possible to Council.

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## **Strategic Plan Alignment:**

The initiative contained within this report supports the following pillars of the strategic plan:

- Service and Simplicity - Quality and Innovative Delivery of Customer Services
  - City-Wide Investments in Infrastructure and Recreational/Cultural Spaces
  - Value: Financial Management to Achieve Financial Sustainability
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## **Conclusion:**

Due to the mandated changes in the 911 system by the CRTC, discussions for a consolidated dispatch service for Niagara Region's emergency services have begun. While there are benefits of the proposed new service, there remains many unknowns that staff cannot report on. Timelines of implementation are also a concern with dispatching services currently expiring at the end of 2022. Further investigation into all options is required to make an educated decision.

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## **Appendices:**

- a. Regional Council Report PHD-08-2021 "Consolidation of Niagara's Emergency 911 Communication Services"

Respectfully submitted,

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## **Report Approval:**

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final approval is by the Chief Administrative Officer.