



**COUNTY OF SAN MATEO**  
**Inter-Departmental Correspondence**  
County Manager's Office



**DATE:** August 22, 2012  
**BOARD MEETING DATE:** September 11, 2012  
**SPECIAL NOTICE/HEARING:** None  
**VOTE REQUIRED:** Majority

**TO:** Honorable Board of Supervisors  
**FROM:** John L. Maltbie, County Manager  
**SUBJECT:** 2011-12 Grand Jury Response

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Approve the Board of Supervisor's response to the 2011-12 Grand Jury report titled:  
Does San Mateo County Need 13 Separate Police Dispatch Centers?

**BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION:**

On May 23, 2012, the Grand Jury filed a report titled: Does San Mateo County Need 13 Separate Police Dispatch Centers? The Board of Supervisors is required to submit comments on the findings and recommendations pertaining to the matters under control of the County of San Mateo within ninety days. The County's response to the report is due to the Hon. Gerald J. Buchwald no later than October 15, 2012.

Acceptance of this report contributes to the Shared Vision 2025 outcome of a Collaborative Community by ensuring that all Grand Jury findings and recommendations are thoroughly reviewed by the appropriate County departments and that, when appropriate, process improvements are made to improve the quality and efficiency of services provided to the public and other agencies.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no Net County Cost associated with accepting this report.

## Does San Mateo County Need 13 Separate Police Dispatch Centers?

### Findings:

**Grand Jury Finding Number 1.** In San Mateo County there are 15 different fire departments or districts, all of which use the Public Safety Communications Center for dispatch. The Redwood City Fire Station on Marshall Street is the back-up facility for fire dispatch.

**Response.** Partially agree. There are 17 fire agencies in San Mateo County. The Redwood City Fire Station on Marshall Street houses the County's back-up communications facility primarily dedicated to fire and ambulance dispatch. In addition to fire and ambulance dispatch, it is also capable of providing contingency law enforcement dispatch and communications services.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 2.** There are 16 Police Departments in the County, including the San Mateo County Sheriff.

**Response.** Agree.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 3.** The number of police dispatch centers in the County has been reduced from 22 to 13 over the last 12 years.

**Response.** Disagree. There are a total of 21 special district/towns/cities in the County. To the County's knowledge, the cities of Half Moon Bay, East Palo Alto and Broadmoor have always outsourced their police communications service. For over 30 years, the towns of Woodside and Portola Valley have contracted with the Sheriff's Office for law enforcement services and communications services have been provided by the County dispatch center. Out of the 16 remaining cities, Millbrae, San Carlos, Colma, Brisbane and Pacifica have outsourced communications services within the last 12 years. This leaves 11\* municipal dispatch centers and one County Dispatch Center. (\*Colma receives part-time service from South San Francisco and has been deducted from the 16 centers).

**Grand Jury Finding Number 4.** For those cities operating their own dispatch centers the average cost per call is \$30.04. For those cities contracting out dispatch the average cost per call is \$18.45. Some of the cost difference is due to the fact that dispatchers in many cities perform additional duties while cities that contract out are just paying for dispatch services.

**Response.** Partially agree. While the County agrees that economies of scale are achieved by consolidation, determining the cost per call for each agency in the County is complex. Many agencies include other functions in their call center budgets and the cost of those services would still need to be covered if dispatch was outsourced. Thus, until a detailed study of all the costs currently included in each

communications center budget is done, true comparisons of contract versus in-house costs will not be completely accurate.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 5.** Pacifica and San Carlos each realized large cost savings when they contracted with other cities for police dispatch. These savings, taken together with the low cost per call noted above for cities contracting out dispatch, demonstrate that consolidation of police dispatch represents a significant cost reduction opportunity for cities with a standalone police dispatch function.

**Response.** Agree. Significant cost savings are achieved by consolidation. In reviewing recent consolidations in which the County has been involved, we can confirm there have been direct savings, increased efficiencies, and in most cases enhanced levels of service. In-direct savings can also be achieved when a contract agency re-organizes after outsourcing dispatch.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 6.** Some municipal police dispatch centers have only one dispatcher on duty at certain times. Some have a minimum of two.

**Response.** Agree.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 7.** Larger police dispatch centers have dedicated dispatch teams, not distracted by tangential responsibilities, and tend to provide better training programs for the intense dispatch job.

**Response.** Agree. Research has shown that repetition of core competencies produces expertise. Large centers field large volumes of activity, which keeps staff repeatedly engaged in core duties. Smaller agencies tend to have lower call volume and often less demand. In larger agencies, training programs tend to be more structured and conducted in academy-type group settings compared to training in smaller agencies that is often on-the-job.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 8.** The PSC has a minimum of nine dispatchers on duty at all times.

**Response.** Agree. The County staffs four 24 hour/seven day a week law enforcement dispatch consoles, three 24 hour/seven day a week fire dispatch consoles, one 24 hour/seven day a week emergency medical services dispatch console and has one shift supervisor at all times. In addition, the center staffs both law enforcement and Emergency Medical Dispatch call takers 20 hours a day and break relief for each shift.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 9.** There is no back-up for the law enforcement dispatch portion of the PSC, even though the PSC itself is a back-up center for other police dispatch centers in the County.

**Response.** Partially Agree. The County agrees that the County Dispatch Center is the designated 911 systems default for eight other dispatch agencies in the County. The County Dispatch Center can also assume radio communication for all municipal agencies that the County doesn't already serve. However, in situations where a back-up center is needed, there is currently no dispatch center in the County that has the capability to answer another center's seven-digit emergency or business telephone lines.

The County disagrees that there is no back-up law enforcement dispatch portion of the PSC. The County maintains a Fire/EMS back-up center in Redwood City. This Center is equipped with both conventional and digital trunked radio systems which can assume radio communications for any law enforcement agency in the county using the mutual aid channels. This back-up center is fully automated with a digital telephone system and computer-aided-dispatch system.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 10.** No single dispatch site is currently available that can handle all police dispatch. Several dispatch centers, including South San Francisco, the City of San Mateo, Redwood City, Menlo Park and the PSC, have facilities with the capacity to expand to provide police dispatch services to additional jurisdictions.

**Response.** Agree. The County agrees that currently, there is no single facility that can house all the law dispatchers in the county. But, the County is planning to relocate our dispatch center and is planning to include sufficient space in our new facility to accommodate a countywide staff.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 11.** The County Sheriff owns, and the PSC operates, the "Green Channel" (a proprietary radio communications channel) which enables interoperability across all law enforcement departments and through which mutual aid from emergency-response agencies is achieved.

**Response.** Agree

**Grand Jury Finding Number 12.** All those interviewed believe that dispatch consolidation is beneficial, and most of those interviewed believe the County should have more than one dispatch center.

**Response.** Agree. While we agree that dispatch consolidation is beneficial, we cannot comment on statements made by those interviewed by the Grand Jury.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 13.** Factors that hinder consolidation include the perceived need for local dispatchers, the fact that some dispatchers also have other responsibilities, the incompatibility of equipment, and differences in the levels of service offered by various police departments. Grand Jury interviews revealed that

cities that have completed consolidation of police dispatch have found these issues to be manageable.

**Response. Agree.** The County agrees that there are many factors that have hindered consolidation. While we cannot comment on what the Grand Jury interviews revealed, we can confirm that all jurisdictions that receive dispatch service from the County have not had problems with the issues noted above.

**Grand Jury Finding Number 14.** Elected officials in some cities have been reluctant to consolidate police dispatch.

**Response.** Agree

**Grand Jury Finding Number 15.** All cities that have outsourced police dispatch services, either to other cities or to the County, pay considerably less for dispatch services without degradation of service.

**Response.** Partially Agree. The County cannot comment on those who have outsourced to other cities. The County can confirm that those agencies that have outsourced dispatch to the County have saved money.

**Recommendations:**

The Grand Jury recommends to the County Board of Supervisors that it:

1. Directs the County Office of Public Safety Communications to develop an arrangement with another facility for back-up of its law enforcement dispatch functions.

**Response.** Agree. This recommendation will be incorporated into the current planning efforts for relocating the County dispatch center.