

Minutes of the "Ad Hoc" Committee on Emergency Communications and Dispatch

The "Ad Hoc" Committee on Emergency Communications and Dispatch of the McLean County Board met on Wednesday, February 18, 2003 at 10:00 a.m. in Room 700, Law and Justice Center, 104 West Front Street, Bloomington, Illinois.

Members Present: Chairman Sorensen, Members Renner, Johnson, Selzer

Members Absent: Member Hoselton

Other Members Present: County Board Chairman Sweeney, Members, Moss, Segobiano, Rodgers, Rackauskas, Bostic

Staff Present: Mr. John Zeunik, County Administrator;
Mr. Terry Lindberg, Assistant County Administrator;
Ms. Christine Northcutt, County Administrator's Assistant

Department Heads/
Elected Officials Present: Sheriff Dave Owens; Mr. A.W. Cannon, Director, MetCom; Mr. Bill Gamblin, Director, ETSB, Chief Deputy Derick Love, Sheriff's Department

Others Present: City of Bloomington Fire Chief Keith Ranney,
Bloomington Township Fire Protection District Chief Tom Willan, Randolph Township Fire Protection District Chief Dennis Powell

Chairman Sorensen called the meeting to order at 10:07 a.m.

Chairman Sorensen presented the minutes from the February 7th meeting. He asked if there were any corrections or additions. Hearing none, the minutes were accepted and placed on file as presented.

Chairman Sorensen announced that there were some items for information. The first item is correspondence received from the McLean County Fire Chief's Association. He invited any members of that Association that were present to speak to the Committee.

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Chairman Sorensen asked the gentlemen, for the record, to state their name and which agency they were representing. The representatives from the McLean County Fire Chiefs Association introduced themselves: Mr. Dennis Powell, Fire Chief, Randolph Township Fire Department, Mr. Keith Ranney, Fire Chief, Bloomington Fire Department, Mr. Tom Willan, Fire Chief, Rural Bloomington Township.

Chairman Sorensen stated that these gentlemen were here to address the letter from the McLean County Fire Chief's Association concerning the MetCom Dispatch Center. He welcomed them and their comments.

City of Bloomington Fire Chief Keith Ranney stated that the McLean County Fire Chief's Association was formed about a year ago to express mutual administrative and operational concerns. One of the things that continues to surface in their meetings are the pluses and minuses of the current radio system. Chief Ranney stated Bloomington and Normal are both a part of the EF Johnson 800 MHz system. The rural communities have remained on the 154 MHz radio band. They have found ways to communicate with each other. The Fire Chiefs Association wanted to make the Board aware that there are 20 fire departments that rely heavily on the MetCom system. They are very happy with the interoperability of the system. He stated that interoperability is a very important concern for the fire departments. Chief Ranney noted that this Committee is working very hard to find a solution to this problem. There are few things the McLean County Fire Chief's Association would like to see remain in tact:

1. They would like to see MetCom continue to provide Countywide dispatch. The fire departments moved from a ring down system to centralized professional dispatching of all ambulances, fire trucks and police vehicles. The ability to communicate at an emergency scene has been enhanced with that feature.
2. Bloomington Fire Department has had good luck with the EF Johnson 800 MHz system with the way that they utilize it. The way that fire utilizes it may be different than other agencies. The radios are beginning to age now and they have begun deliberations on whether or not to replace them.
3. As the Committee moves forward, Chief Ranney expressed the hope that the Committee will consider a system that everyone in the County can use.
4. The rural fire agencies have a very limited budget. When the Committee reaches a point where they are ready to make a recommendation, Chief Ranney asked the Committee to consider a system that everyone can afford.

Chairman Sorensen asked the Committee Members if they had any questions.

Mr. Selzer asked Chief Ranney how many fire departments rely on MetCom for dispatch. Chief Ranney replied 34.

Mr. Selzer asked Chief Ranney how should MetCom be structured so that there is more equal representation for each separate department and agency. It is basically a police department run agency as it stands.

Chief Ranney stated more representation may not be practical. The financial support for the organization is heavily lopsided toward Bloomington and Normal. Chief Ranney said that he is here to support MetCom and to keep MetCom in place. The Fire Departments have relied heavily on Chief Denny Powell and he has done a good job representing them.

Rural Bloomington Township Fire Chief Tom Willan stated that centralized dispatch is the most important issue within the rural fire departments. If MetCom is taken away, the County would be taking a 15 year step backward. Interoperability is also very important. The incident at the World Trade Center was made worse due to the lack of interoperability. McLean County could have a large incident and interoperability would be important.

Chief Willan stated that all three individuals speaking before the Board today have had problems with MetCom. What is important to remember is that the dispatchers are human and do make mistakes. He stated it would be doing a disservice to the citizens of McLean County to disband MetCom.

Randolph Township Fire Department Fire Chief Dennis Powell stated that he has been around since the idea of combined communications was first discussed. This was the idea of three individuals – former Sheriff Steve Brien, retired Bloomington Police Chief Tim Linsky, and Jim Taylor, the deceased Normal Police Chief. They had a very strong commitment to this issue. Unfortunately, none of those people are here today and the level of commitment has changed. He stated that he is not sure how to change that. The Fire Service has worked diligently to iron out any problems that it has had with MetCom.

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Chief Powell continued that the rural agencies feel strongly that MetCom should remain in its current capacity. It has improved as it has grown. Mr. Tony Cannon has made some changes and has done an excellent job as Interim Director. If MetCom was to disband, the rural agencies would have no way of being dispatched. The old ring-down phone system provided by GTE (at that time) no longer exists.

As far as the radios are concerned, rural agencies never left the 154 MHz radio band. This frequency works very well for the rural agencies. They can communicate with the Sheriff. They cannot communicate with the Bloomington and Normal Police Departments. When the rural agencies looked at how much it was going to cost to equip everyone with 800 MHz radios, it was obvious that it was not going to be feasible.

Mr. Selzer asked Chief Powell why the MetCom Board hasn't taken any action to try and solve this problem.

Chief Powell replied that this is a complex issue. From the fire perspective, Chief Powell noted that he is very pleased with what is going on at MetCom. He stated that certain departments have changed their radio system, MetCom does not either support or condemn that.

Chief Powell stated that the dispatchers are human and do make mistakes. It is a very complex system. There are different radios that have to be handled. The fact remains that, MetCom is moving forward and is on a positive track.

Chief Powell stated that this is not time for assessing blame. The original radio system was estimated to cost \$14 million and was pared back to around \$7 million. At that time, there was not \$14 million available. The "big three", which is the Town of Normal, City of Bloomington and the County, made that decision because they did not have the money available to purchase a \$14 million system. The consultant that designed the system stated that the 800 MHz simulcast is better than what they had and that it must be enhanced as time goes on.

Mr. Selzer asked the Committee comes up with the "magic solution" and the dollars to fund it, does the Committee have the authority to put it into place.

Mr. Renner stated that there is a difference between regional radio communications and MetCom. The Committee's charge is to decide if MetCom is the vehicle by which they want to provide regional communication. The general consensus is that most agencies want regional communications.

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Chief Willan stated that it takes a team effort to run MetCom. There are three major players, the Town of Normal, City of Bloomington and McLean County. Chief Willan suggested that these agencies need to have a single goal for MetCom to be run successfully.

Mr. Selzer said he totally agrees with that statement. He said he disagrees with one thing, and that is that we do not have the money. He stated that if a proposal is put on the table, it is the job of the County Board Members to find the money. There is money for other projects and will be for this one if there was a single goal.

Chief Powell stated that it was that way in the very beginning. There were three major players who shared a similar goal.

Chairman Sorensen asked if any other County Board Members had anything to add.

Mr. Segobiano stated that he has heard for years that everyone wants regional communication and that things are getting better. As Board Members, how much money are we going to ask the taxpayers to spend in order to get the communications up to a level that is satisfactory. There needs to be a time frame in which to finalize this project.

Chief Ranney stated that he doesn't think that it is fair to make a judgement as to whether MetCom is doing a good job or not, because MetCom is just now fully staffed for the first time in many years. He has seen significant improvements since there is sufficient staff.

Chief Ranney added that it is necessary to separate radio problems and communications. These are two totally separate issues and should not be lumped together. He stated that he is very appreciative of the improvements that have been made at MetCom. If MetCom can remain fully staffed, and possibly add a clerk to aide with administrative duties they will continue to improve.

Mr. Segobiano stated that he has been hearing positive comments about the changes in MetCom.

Chairman Sorensen stated that the next item for business was to review the Intergovernmental Agreement that establishes MetCom.

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Mr. Selzer stated that he doesn't think that MetCom's present structure works. The Police Chiefs who constitute a quorum on the Board are the ones who complain about the responsibilities assigned to MetCom, both dispatch and tower infrastructure.

Ms. Johnson asked if this Committee can make a request of the MetCom Board to appear before the Committee to explain their position.

Chairman Sorensen stated that the Committee can ask the Board to come, but cannot demand that the MetCom Board appear.

Mr. Selzer asked if a Community Advisory Board has been appointed as per the Intergovernmental Agreement. Mr. Selzer suggested that the agreement needs to be revisited.

Mr. Renner stated that if the County was not directly involved in MetCom and if the County provided its own centralized dispatch center, then the rural communities could have the option to join and Bloomington and Normal could join as well. The County Board would, then, have greater administrative control and clearer accountability.

Mr. Selzer stated he would support any agency that would set a standard and live up to it. Someone needs to step up and take accountability. Mr. Selzer suggested that one solution is to keep the current MetCom employees and just make it a County dispatch. Currently, everyone thinks it is a County Board responsibility anyway, even though the County Board has only two votes out of seven on that board.

Mr. Renner stated that centralized dispatch is a County issue, the County Board just doesn't have control.

Chairman Sorensen asked the Committee if there were some specific findings that they can agree to, for example, a centralized County Dispatch Center is a good thing for everyone involved.

Mr. Selzer stated that, perhaps, the County Board should give the MetCom Board a list of findings and goals.

Chairman Sorensen stated that the MetCom Board is lacking one thing that other Boards have, and that is accountability to the voters. He stated that he thinks it would be good for this Committee to prepare a series of findings concerning MetCom. If the County Board could agree with the finding in that document, it could act as a vote of confidence for MetCom. The Bloomington City Council

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and the Normal Town Council would then review this document and give their approval or disapproval.

Chairman Sweeney interjected that this Committee will report to the County Board and the full Board can present the document to Bloomington and Normal.

Mr. Selzer stated that he thought there should be an elected official on the MetCom Board.

Sheriff Owens noted that there are two elected officials on the MetCom Board.

Mr. Selzer replied that Sheriff Owens represents the Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff Owens stated that he represents the citizens of McLean County.

Mr. Selzer stated that he meant an elected official from the policy-making side.

Mr. Renner stated that everyone agrees that the goal of MetCom is to provide a Countywide dispatch system. Mr. Renner asked if the County can we pull out of MetCom and still have a Countywide dispatch system.

Mr. Selzer asked who owns the building where MetCom is housed. Mr. John Zeunik, County Administrator responded that the Public Building Commission owns the building.

Mr. Moss stated that he thinks it would be helpful to hear from the Bloomington and Normal Police Chiefs. Mr. Moss said that he thinks that neither department is having a problem with equipment, but asked if the police departments are receiving centralized dispatch services that they want and expect. Mr. Moss stated that the other part of the problem is finding a radio system that will meet the needs of the Sheriff's Department.

Chairman Sorensen stated that the Committee needs to remember that there are two issues - the radios and the communications.

Mr. Selzer noted that no one consulted the County Board when the decision was made to change their radio systems. That is what the County Board needs to do.

Ms. Johnson mentioned that she wanted to hear from the MetCom Board and from the Police Departments because if the County Board makes a decision about MetCom, it needs to know where these individuals stand on these issues.

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Chairman Sorensen stated that the charge of this Committee is to identify and present to the County Board a potential solution set for both MetCom issues and for the Sheriff's Department and rural agency's radio issues. He cautioned the Committee to be careful on how much emphasis they put on Bloomington and Normal's Police Departments. He warned that if the Committee begins direct dialog with anyone else outside of the scope of that charge, it will find itself in the same position that MetCom is in now.

Chairman Sorensen stated that the ideal would be for the Committee to create a possible solution set to be put before the County Board. The County Board would then take that to MetCom and ETSB.

Mr. Zeunik stated that since he is currently serving as the Chairman of the MetCom Board, he can advise the Committee that the MetCom Board would not have any answers to their questions. Mr. Tony Cannon, Interim Director of MetCom, was just given the charge to bring to the Board a work plan including the future and feasibility of centralized dispatch and communications as it now exists under MetCom.

Mr. Zeunik informed the Committee that one of the issues that must be evaluated is, the cost of operating independently. One of the concerns of the Board is staffing levels. The MetCom Board has just begun to look at this issue. They intend to study it over the next six months.

Ms. Johnson stated she appreciated the explanation from Mr. Zeunik.

Mr. Renner stated that if a transition was made from MetCom to McLean County becoming responsible for centralized dispatch, there are administrative issues to consider, employees, collective bargaining issues, and service to rural communities, etc.

Mr. Selzer stated that he would like to create a "white paper" to be presented to the County Board.

Mr. Zeunik stated that is why the MetCom Board wants to look at this issue. The current Intergovernmental Agreement has a severe penalty for any entity that decides, on its own, to walk away. The Intergovernmental Agreement was approved at a time when everyone assumed that there would be one radio system and one centralized dispatch center. The agreement doesn't address what happens when one or more agencies changes their radio systems, as Bloomington and Normal have done.

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Chairman Sorensen asked the Committee if they agree that they are the catalyst to begin these conversations. The Committee probably needs to go as far as a recommended solution set for both issues, radios and dispatch. The solution set will be presented to the County Board, and if endorsed, can then be presented to others.

The Committee Members verbally agreed.

Chairman Sorensen stated that Mr. Selzer has asked for additional time to study the Intergovernmental Agreement. MetCom history and MetCom business perspectives can be provided by Mr. Zeunik, Sheriff Owens and Fire Chief Dennis Powell. The Committee agreed.

Chairman Sorensen advised the Committee that they will carry over the item of reviewing the Intergovernmental Agreement to the next meeting. He asked the Committee when they would like to schedule the next meeting.

Mr. Selzer stated that he would prefer an evening meeting time so that the Committee can meet until it can finalize a document to be presented to the County Board.

Chairman Sorensen stated that he had scheduled early afternoon meetings for that reason and so the Committee Members do not have to stay late into the evening. He asked the Committee what is their preference.

Mr. Selzer stated Thursday, February 27th at 1:00 p.m. would work. Mr. Renner stated that he has an obligation at 3:30 p.m. He could go and come back if necessary. The Committee agreed.

Mr. Renner stated that he was still interested in hearing from Sheriff Owens regarding StarComm 21. Sheriff Owens replied that he has created an informal document with thoughts and information.

Ms. Johnson asked Chairman Sorensen if the next meeting would be to address MetCom as well as continue the discussion on the radios.

Chairman Sorensen stated that Mr. Selzer had another issue that he wanted to address.

Mr. Selzer stated that he would like to make a Request for Information of the Motorola Company regarding specifics about the StarComm 21 system.

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Ms. Johnson stated that, perhaps, the Committee members could e-mail questions to Chairman Sorensen that they had so they could all be presented to Motorola one time.

Chairman Sorensen stated that most vendors would require at least 30 days to respond to a Request For Information (RFI).

Ms. Johnson stated that they would need to have certain questions answered before the Committee can make a recommendation to the Board.

Chairman Sorensen advised the Committee that he will draft an RFI to be sent to both Motorola and Clear Talk. If the Committee has any specific questions they would like to have answered by either vendor, Chairman Sorensen requested that the Committee submit the questions to him as soon as possible.

There being nothing further to come before the Committee at this time, Chairman Sorensen adjourned the meeting at 11:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Christine Northcutt
Recording Secretary