

CENTRAL VERMONT PUBLIC SAFETY AUTHORITY

WHY Kill it ?

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The Chamber of Commerce and citizens in various municipalities in the region worked to form a 4 town regional public safety communications system that became the Central Vermont Public Safety Authority (CVPSA) in 2013. They understood that the economic health of the region as well as the safety of residents depended on “an affordable, integrated, efficient system of public safety services (fire, police, ambulance, and dispatch) that protects the public welfare and provides rapid responses with highly qualified personnel when emergency situations arise ” just like the merger of the two small hospitals into the Central Vermont Hospital years earlier.

Unfortunately Hostility to the Authority was prenatal. In Berlin, and Barre Town volunteer firefighters and police convinced the voters not to join, leaving Barre and Montpelier as the only members. No other municipalities have become full members of the authority. None of the surrounding towns represented by Capital Fire Mutual Aid System (CFMAS), nor CFMAS itself, ever became members.

Regretfully, the Public Safety Authority had a different life than the hospital. It is now on life support. Both Cities have voted to withdraw from the Authority. The CVPSA Board voted to dissolve the Authority. The voters who created the Authority have a final say on both issues. I hope

they reject it. In the past they have been unfailingly supportive of the Authority and approved its budgets by large majorities.

Why are fire and police organizations so hostile? The Vermont Supreme Court in Buttolph v Osborn 119 Vt 116 (1956) gave a simple but accurate answer. It rejected a bid by opponents to stop a Town from closing an underperforming high school and tuitioning its students to another town. The Court characterized the inherent problem preventing regionalization as “the fierce democracy of the towns” which, the opinion states, arises out of a fear of losing local control. This fear is an endemic feature of Vermont life. Fire and Police agencies also wish to avoid public oversight. They have a legitimate concern that their operations are not understood by the public and they will be unjustly criticized. As former Police Chief Brian Peete told me, the public are long on opinions but short on experience. To meet this problem, the CVPSA board asked city councils to appoint Fire or Police Chiefs to join the Board. They refused.

But there is a significant problem threatening the functioning of public safety response in the region. The entire radio communications infrastructure serving the cities and the surrounding towns is nearing the end of useful life. The overloaded radio frequency used is shared with the CFMAS towns. Often undisciplined “chatter”, including Canadian Taxi dispatch on that frequency, jam it. Added to this are aging equipment, obsolescence without spare parts, and dead spots. The region’s communication services are compromised. CVPSA hired a firm, TELEVATE, to fully identify the problems and suggest solutions. It issued a report in August 2021. The cost to upgrade the system was estimated to cost \$6.5 Million. The cost was simply too great for any one entity to bear,

especially because many municipalities benefited. The Cities and CFMAS decided CVPSA was unnecessary, and each would seek state and federal grants to pay for upgrades in their geographic region. Everyone would find their own life boats.

Life was breathed into this termination plan when in 2022 the Vermont Department of Public Safety (DPS) secured state funding of \$11 million to bolster local regional dispatch centers. There is a crisis in the statewide dispatching and the 911 system, which dispatches for almost 100 towns (many for free). This arrangement was so complex and stressful that dispatchers were quitting, causing the system to operate at near 50% vacancy levels, putting more stress on those that remained. The department wanted to shift work to local agencies to solve many State problems. Another \$9 million in earmarks is now expected to be available in 2023. Once there was a discussion of the possibility of “free money” being available to solve central vermont local communications, interest in CVPSA evaporated. DPS conditionally approved a grant for about \$2.5 million to Montpelier to distribute to CFMAS., (nearly \$1million in addition was rejected as not eligible). The grant was conditioned on a governance plan being created. If grant money was insufficient the equipment provider ,MOTOROLA, would provide engineering and equipment with a plan for payment with interest. As of today the legislature is studying how governance and funding of the shift to local control will be managed.

In my opinion the voters should not agree to allow CVPSA to be dissolved and the Cities should not be allowed to withdraw. The CVPSA charter, perhaps with some needed amendments, is an excellent vehicle for constructing a regional system, which is the future of public safety

communications. It should be kept alive by a NO VOTE on the dissolution of CVPSA

-30-