



September 27, 2021

Dear What-Comm board members,

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the Fire Chiefs of Whatcom County oppose the consolidation or co-location of the Prospect and What-Comm dispatch centers.

We feel the current system provides the best value to the taxpayers and best meets the needs of the individual fire departments. Each fire department is a consumer of dispatch services and responsible for purchasing the best service for their agency and community. When Whatcom County asked the fire districts to help them by providing medical care, they agreed to pay for the fire dispatch fees. As EMS work and responsibility has increased, the dispatch fees do not come close to covering the cost of providing medical services. The initial request was for a simple initial response, but it has grown to the point where BLS crews are responding to and handling the majority of EMS calls. This has put departments in the position of trying to cover EMS funding with fire suppression levies set up by the state that were only intended for fire protection. Departments rely on the quality and expertise of having our own highly trained dispatchers to help offset some of these short comings.

We have heard the opinion that consolidating the centers would lead to efficiencies and cost savings. We have done some rough models and estimates of a consolidated center and concluded that a combined center would increase dispatch fees. Both fire and law enforcement dispatchers are highly trained in their respected discipline. Cross training all dispatchers to the current high standard would be an additional cost and lengthen the time needed to get them fully trained. What-Comm has experienced a higher turnover rate than Prospect and we anticipate What-Comm's turnover rate will carry over in a co-located or combined center. The need for keeping high training standards with the high turnover will significantly increase the cost of training new dispatchers.

Whatcom County is made up of a variety of communities and fire departments from rural volunteer agencies to urban areas that are covered by multiple stations. Due to a variety of response times, it is imperative that we have highly trained dispatchers that are capable of initiating quality patient care. Patient care starts when someone calls 911 and it continues until the patient is released by the EMS crews or the hospital. Patient outcomes are directly influenced by the care they receive from a dispatcher. Under our current operational model, dispatchers who are trained as EMT's and specialize in medical dispatching provide a higher level of patient care. This training and experience allows them to be proficient in coaching callers and by-standers in life saving procedures. Whatcom County EMS has a reputation for providing a high level of care. Looking around the state at other EMS systems that have great reputations, they also have dedicated fire/EMS dispatchers.

The fire chiefs see benefit in having two local centers that can provide backup services to each other. The proposal of moving our backup dispatch center out of the area would create significant obstacles

and expenses that would need to be studied before making any changes. We frequently use our local backup and see advantage in our current model which ensures quick availability to us when needed.

Clearly What-Comm is in need of a new facility, but the fire service should not be forced to help fund a new building. Prospect operates well at Bellingham Fire Department Station 1 and the current remodel will serve us for many years. Moving fire dispatch to a combined center would cause a significant increase in dispatch fees to pay for the new facility. Departments, and ultimately taxpayers, would be left paying more money for an inferior service.

Fire/EMS and law enforcement have very different dispatch needs and we oppose combining or co-locating our dispatch centers. Combining the centers would likely increase costs and reduce the quality service we currently appreciate. The cost of consolidation has not been adequately evaluated and there seems to be many negative impacts to combining the two dispatch centers. Consolidation has been a topic of the What-Comm Administrative Board for many years. Keeping an open mind on this issue is important to us but it is time to stop analyzing the co-location and consolidation of our dispatch centers. We, as Fire Chief's, desire a final resolution to this issue so both centers can proceed with strategic planning and long-range goal setting for the future.

Respectfully, on behalf of the Whatcom County Fire Chief's Association,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry DeBruin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jerry DeBruin -Whatcom County Chief's Association President