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Boone considering dispatch options

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BOONE COUNTY - A study of funding sources for the Boone County 911/Emergency Communication System indicates there are sufficient resources to cover immediate needs, but a long-range fix must be found.



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Boone County Judge-executive Gary Moore plans to explore a recommendation in the study that suggests consolidation of services with other Northern Kentucky agencies might provide a solution.

"I have had some initial and very preliminary talks with other officials," Moore said. "I think everyone is willing to take a look, because this funding challenge is not unique to us."

Moore emphasized that it is essential for high service levels to be maintained at the Public Safety Communications Center and said additional resources would be expended from the county budget, if needed, to ensure that.

"This is an essential service that will be sufficiently maintained," Moore said.

The funding study was prompted because the city of Florence indicated it would no longer pay an additional \$600,000 per year to subsidize the PSCC, which handles 911 calls.

The annual operating subsidy of approximately \$1.8 million is funded with county tax dollars and the supplemental amount that Florence has traditionally paid. Because Florence residents already pay county taxes, and no other city contributes a supplemental amount, city officials there have argued that they are being charged twice for the service.

Florence officials have said for several years that a more equitable formula needed to be found but that plea fell on deaf ears. Last year, the city council voted to reduce by half the requested allocation of PSCC funds in its budget.

The study indicates the city's decision was justified.

"The city of Florence position with respect to disproportionate funding from city taxpayers is valid

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and should be addressed by the county and the city," the study states.

The challenge of funding emergency communications systems is a national problem brought on by a decrease in the number of land-based phones, or landlines.

The PSCC system in Boone County was founded in 1979 through an interlocal agreement between Boone County and the city of Florence.

The PSCC provides communications services and record keeping for law enforcement agencies and the nine fire districts within the county. In 1990, the county established a dedicated 911 monthly fee of \$1.50 per telephone line to assist in funding services.

In Boone County, the PSCC staff includes 35 employees and its operating budget for Fiscal Year 2011 is estimated at \$3.65 million, not including capital outlay.

Much of the funding for 911 systems comes from surcharges added to telephone bills and the charge is much lower for cell phones than landlines. As cell phone usage has increased, the number of land-based phones has declined, creating an ongoing funding challenge for the service.

The current 911 fee for landlines is \$2.49 per line each month, compared to 70 cents monthly for cell phones. Cell phone fees are regulated by the state and a portion of that fee is retained by the state, according to the study.

"Landlines are also used in greater numbers by the elderly and low-income people that can't afford cell phones, which puts a disproportionate burden on them," Moore said.

Ideally, a more equitable funding solution would be implemented, or compelled by legislators, but that seems unlikely in the near future.

"There does not appear to be any legislative solution on the horizon, at the state or federal level that will address the PSCC funding deficiency in the short term," the study states.

There are currently five communications centers in Northern Kentucky - in Boone, Kenton and Campbell counties and in the cities of Erlanger and Covington.

With consolidation, Moore says, the same level of service might be maintained using just two centers.

The 10-member committee, which was formed in July of 2010, was made up of two members each from the PSCC, the Florence City Council, the Boone County Fiscal Court, the county's fire districts and one Boone County business leader and citizen. It was staffed by Boone County Administrator Jeff Earlywine and PSCC Director Jim Staverman.

A review of the study could result in formal recommendations from the Boone County Fiscal Court as early as this spring

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