

Memorandum

TO: Mayor and Borough Council
FROM: Jeffrey Stonehill, Borough Manager
DATE: January 8, 2009



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RE: Communications Center

Recently, a member of Borough Council once again questioned the wisdom of operating our own Communications Center. Let me be frank; if there was any financial benefit in closing the operation, I would have recommended it years ago. Despite what the public thinks, closing the Communications Center would cost us a lot of money. In summary, the extra police work alone (and much of it on overtime) would quickly eliminate any financial benefit from closing the operation. There are no feasible alternatives to avoid these additional expenses - none.

Finally, the majority of the cost of operating the Communications Center (which is almost the least expensive operation in the budget) is paid by utility fees (water, sewer, and electricity) with only a small percentage paid by taxes. Any substitute to their work would be paid mainly by taxes alone and, therefore, taxes would need to go up to execute the closing of the Communications Center. It is a bad idea.

The questions asked are answered below:

1. With regard to customer service, how does the Communications Center keep people from feeling scared? Scared of what?

Middletown is unique among municipalities because we operate our own utility services. It is because of our utility services that the Borough is able to accomplish so many other things and provide the quality of life unequalled in older boroughs. The Communications Center is a twenty-four hour per day call center. Just like United Water, Comcast or PPL might have a twenty-four hour per day customer service telephone line, our Communications Center is a vital part of our operations. When the lights go out, or there is a water main break, or a prowler in the back yard, having an attentive live person available to assist you is irreplaceable. It is the single most important service provided to our citizens, and evidence exists that our citizens depend on it. There is no worthy or cost-effective replacement to this service. Voicemail systems, telephone answering services, or county EOC are all good but not necessarily cheaper and are a whole lot less effective. Any person who has listened to tapes or sat in the Communications Center will realize the benefit of this type of old-fashioned customer service. We talk to our citizens, take notes, look up information, and generally help people every day. Not only does closing the Communications Center cost extra money, it makes Middletown a worse place to live.

2. How many kennel fees does the Communications Center process a year?

The Communications Center earns approximately 7-10 kennel fees in a year. In 2008, the Communications Center placed 19 dogs into the Borough kennel. These animals are either given back to the owner (which requires a kennel fee) or are picked up by the Humane Society. Harrisburg City for example, has a full-time dog catcher who takes their dogs to the Humane Society. Derry

Township has the same operation as Middletown. The standard practice among other departments is to assign a police officer to take stray animals to the Humane Society because they do not operate a kennel. While the animal is being transported, the community is either without one officer or it pays overtime to a second officer to cover the patrol. Either way, the elimination of the Borough kennel would be costly in police overtime, and without the Communications Center, operating the kennel would be challenging.

Along with having a kennel, the Communications Center maintains a book of lost and found animals. If a citizen reports a lost or found animal the book is checked to see if it has been previously reported. Also, by law the Communications Center maintains a record of animals placed into the Borough kennel and their ultimate disposition. The police would not or could not do these things without the Communications Center employees.

3. How many bicycle licenses do we process a year?

The Communications Center issues 5 bicycle licenses per year. However the employees of the Communications Center maintain a database with over 700 registered bicycles. This is a service that Todd Webb has begun to expand. We would like to get this program into Fink School and the after-school program at the Main Street Youth Center. It is a valuable program, but it needs more advertising. Harrisburg City does not handle bike registrations; it is done by paid Police at their community substations but, because it relies on paid officers, it is almost non-existent. The Derry Township Communications Center does not handle bicycles either.

4. How many electric/water account bills does the Communications Center process a year?

The Finance Department reports that the Communications Center averages about 650 utility payments per year. Harrisburg City does not handle utility bills. Derry Township does not handle cash or money at all, nor does it take utility payments. In general, having a place to drop your payment is seen as an important service; some people want to hand their payments to a person and not slip it into a box. Not only does closing the Communications Center cost extra money, it eliminates another nice service.

5. How many parking fines a year does the Communications Center process a year?

According to Officer Weaver, who handles parking ticket verification for the Police Department, approximately 300-400 parking tickets are issued per year. Of that number, 90% are paid through the Communications Center; the rest are by mail. Once again, having an attentive live person available to assist you is irreplaceable. Parking tickets can cause confusion or anxiety. In general, having a place to drop your payment and ask a question or two is seen as an important service. The police could not do these things, and the Finance Department is only open during business hours.

6. When reports state that we process over 60,000 calls a year, does that include all in-house calls (for example, the Borough Manager's office), or just the Communications Center?

That number only includes calls that come into and leave the Communications Center and the Police station. For 2008, the approximate number of incoming and outgoing phone calls for the Communications Center and Police was 112,950. That number also includes the business-related cellular phone calls into and out of the Communications Center and redirected calls to Dauphin County Communications.

What this statistic does not include is the number of minutes used by each officer's business-related cellular telephones. We have begun using the Trivium database located in the basement telephone computer to better track incoming and outgoing calls for each month. As approved in the 2009 budget, the Communications Center will soon become the single "call center" for the Borough, and it is anticipated that this new centralized call answering system will actually increase this statistic significantly. This is another example of getting additional value out of the Communications Center. The Communications Center remains almost the least expensive operation, and finding new activities for these employees makes good business sense.

7. What is the exact procedure when a citizen of the Borough calls 911? Does the call go to Dauphin County 911 and they route it through our Communications Center? Or does Dauphin County relay the call to one of our officers? If they relay the call to our Communications Center, doesn't this add seconds on to any call placed to 911?

When a citizen telephones 911, Dauphin County takes the call, enters the information into their CAD/INET computer and simultaneously notifies Middletown via our Hard Line Connection. By law, Dauphin County 911 cannot transfer an active call. Once the call is non-active, the information that was taken and passed to Middletown is in both systems. If the call is still active (a person on the line), the County Telecommunicator stays on the line and asks a standard series of questions developed by the National Academy of Police Protocol Priority Dispatch system. This is the same system and questions Middletown uses. Although this system may appear to add moments to the process, evidence is that it is not a problem because of our close relationship to Dauphin County and our direct connection. Middletown moves ahead with dispatch directly after Dauphin County answers the call. Also, while Middletown police units are responding to the call, our officers have the ability ask additional questions through the Middletown dispatcher that Dauphin County would not normally ask or track because the questions may be above and beyond the basic National Academy of Police Protocol Priority Dispatch system questions.

Often, when listening to the police radio, you will note this back and forth between our police and the Communications Center on a variety of call-related issues. The County does not offer those additional services to departments; just the basics. Therefore, as a result of having a researcher at their disposal, when our officers arrive on scene they are better prepared to handle the call.

Harrisburg City and Derry Township have the same operation and connection to Dauphin County. In addition, we are in the process of obtaining a connection/account from Dauphin County for their software, INET Viewer. Derry Township has used this program for the last two years and it further enhances response time. With this software, when Dauphin County dispatchers are entering caller information into the computer, our local dispatcher can see the information in "Real Time." This program and the necessary training will not cost Middletown Borough any money. Also, with INET, our Telecommunicators will be able to ask questions via computer (instant message) to the County call-taker while they still have the person with the emergency on the line.

Because people so often call Middletown from other jurisdictions (thinking they are in Middletown), our Communications Center provides a reciprocal service to Dauphin County. This way, when we receive calls for surrounding jurisdictions, we enter the information and transmit up to Dauphin County rather than have the caller hang up and dial another number. We stress being available to callers and avoid just passing them off without some type of assistance.

8. Why are the employees behind a tinted glass and messages relayed via intercom? I understand that they do need to maintain a bit of security given the proximity to the police, but a tinted window is hardly customer service.

There are many who agree that the current tinted glass in the Police lobby is uninviting and unnecessary. While we all recognize that the Police require protection, the current setup was probably not created with the customer in mind. Although it might seem appealing to tear out the glass, we propose that the matter be delayed until a plan is made for renovation or expansion of the Police station. Assuming that renovation happens in the next five to ten years, it may be possible to make a significant change to the Communications Center, the lobby, or even more. However, if this physical barrier is too detrimental to temporarily leave in place, Council could direct staff, with the Mayor and Police Chief, to plan and implement a lobby fix-up during the next budget cycle.

9. Are the warrants that Middletown maintains only maintained at the Middletown Communications Center? Does the County maintain these warrants as well?

Currently there are 23 hard-copy warrants in the Communications Center for the Middletown Police Department. We are the only repository for these warrants. These are criminal complaint warrants for the Middletown Police Department alone. In addition, there are 263 warrants entered into METRO records management system and AOPC statewide warrant search. Both systems are paperless systems that require a local operator in each town. Those records are traffic warrants, misdemeanor, and fine and cost warrants. AOPC searches statewide, while METRO searches departments within the Harrisburg area. The AOPC warrants are cancelled at the District Magistrate Judge level, but warrants in METRO are cancelled only by the Middletown Police.

Recently, there has been much debate as to a statewide warrant entry and cancellation system, but none has yet been formed or funded other than AOPC which every department does not use. Yet another system, CLEAN/NCIC, exists for Wanted Persons, Stolen vehicles, articles, guns, boats and such. This is a national database which every agency uses, which also requires a local operator.

If there were no Communications Center, we would lose the system and have to depend on Dauphin County for the information. Like the rest of the departments, police would have to wait in line for a data search, entry, or cancellation. The downtime for such a delay can be unbearable. For example, it can take as much as 7-10 minutes for drivers' license or license plate searches through Dauphin County.

10. Animal control complaints? Isn't this what we just paid the Humane Society to do?

The agreement currently adopted with the Humane Society is for citizens to take animals to the Humane Society and for the Society to pick up animals from our kennels. As was stated earlier, other departments that do not have kennels must take animals to the Humane Society. This leaves municipalities with one less officer on the street while the animal is being transported. Middletown doesn't have this problem because we have a Borough kennel and the Humane Society picks up for us at their convenience. Only through the operation of a Communications Center is this possible.

11. Does Middletown have higher arrest rates than the following municipalities: Harrisburg City, Lower Paxton Township, Susquehanna Township, Swatara Township, Steelton Borough and Derry Township? Do we have higher prisoner numbers than all the smaller municipalities in Dauphin County?

The issue is not arrest rates but prisoner supervision time. Watching, transporting, and babysitting a prisoner can be very expensive.

Also, with respect to arrest rates, the statistic kept by departments is incidents (not arrests) which can include meal breaks, getting gas, or other non-police related activities so it is tough to measure apples to apples. Below are incident statistics we were able to obtain:

MUNICIPALITY	POPULATION	ARRESTS		INCIDENTS	
		QTY	RATE	QTY	RATE
LOWER PAXTON	45,000	2,119	0.047	20,493	0.455
SUSQUEHANNA	23,207	576	0.025	19,714	0.849
STEELTON	6,000	722	0.120	12,111	2.019
DERRY	22,000	N/A	N/A	22,436	1.020
LOWER SWATARA	9,500	178	0.019	11,000	1.158
HARRISBURG	48,950	6,176	0.126	156,360	3.194
MIDDLETOWN	9,242	791	0.086	10,850	1.174

Unable to obtain stats from Swatara Twp.

As you can see from the above statistics, Middletown's arrest rate is much higher than large townships like Lower Paxton and Susquehanna but less than Harrisburg and Steelton. Our incident rate is very high as well (and we do not track non-police activities like meal breaks or getting gas as incidents). But ultimately, it is prisoner statistics that most importantly justify the expense of the Communications Center.

As far as prisoners are concerned, a record must be kept for every half hour a prisoner is in Middletown's holding cells. The Telecommunicators use closed-caption television to monitor the prisoners so the police can return to the street. If a prisoner is in a holding cell, by law they must be monitored at all times. If Telecommunicators are not there to monitor the prisoners, the responsibility falls on the police officers themselves.

Through most of 2008, there were 598 prisoners held in the holding cells in Middletown for a total of 2,564 monitored man-hours. If police had to monitor prisoners, that would take an officer off the street which would compromise the safety of the officers and also the safety of the citizens of Middletown.

It is logical to assume that an officer would have to be called out on overtime to cover the street while each prisoner is monitored; this is the standard practice in most towns. This sum of money in police overtime to cover prisoner monitoring will easily reach an additional \$180,000 a year based on our prisoner monitored man-hours. **This cost alone eliminates any financial benefit from closing the Communications Center.**

So what are our other choices? Not very good: if we no longer operated the holding cells, Middletown could adopt a system of processing prisoners and releasing them back into the community. Such a choice could be very dangerous. Or, Middletown could adopt a system of

transporting prisoners to the holding cells in Harrisburg or Derry Township. However, it is unlikely that these facilities would look kindly on our prisoners after we shut an important operation that puts additional pressure on them. Assuming we could take our prisoners to Harrisburg, it would take in excess of 1.5 hours to process the prisoner and transport them to Harrisburg. If only 500 of the 791 arrests were processed and transported, that would be an additional 750 overtime hours committed to prisoners versus only a few minutes with the current operation.

These are poor and expensive alternatives.

12. Is it fair that other small towns use our Communications Center to watch their prisoners where no such choices exist for us? Can we charge other towns?

It is not fair, but there is nothing we can do. Our County has never organized a central prisoner handling and processing system; each town is on their own. As such, a system has developed over time where some towns (Harrisburg, Derry and Middletown) have picked up the slack for not having a good system. It would be wrong to dump on Harrisburg and Derry by abandoning our prisoner system as they are not to blame. Further, police departments cannot charge each other for police services. We all support each other under mutual aid, and even though Middletown may be more generous in our mutual aid than other towns, we all use mutual aid and there is currently no better alternative.

Ultimately, this issue of fairness can only be addressed at the County level. If Dauphin County chose to help institute a county-wide prisoner handling system, we might actually receive financial assistance for our Communications Center or support to allow its elimination. However, given that there are no plans to investigate a county-wide system, the current unfair system is actually the best. Further, it would be our taxpayers who would bear the cost of unilaterally closing the Communications Center and eliminating prisoner handling - so ultimately, the current system protects our citizens from these added expenses.

13. How can we compare Harrisburg and Derry Township with Middletown regarding having a Communication Center? Harrisburg is a thriving city, and Derry Township is one of the most popular destinations in the entire Northeast. There is simply no comparing these two municipalities to Middletown.

When you look at the comparison of Communications Centers it is important to look at call volume, arrests and functions of the centers rather than the town's economic development. In regards to the comparison of Communication Centers, the statistics of citizens/incidents are an indication of need. Harrisburg City by far has the highest ratio of 3.19 citizens/incidents. Middletown follows at 1.17 incidents per citizen, followed by Derry Twp. at 1.01.

When you compare the quantity of services provided to the citizens, the Middletown Communications Center provides more than Derry and Harrisburg combined. The call volume for police may be higher in Derry and Harrisburg, but the amount of services provided to the public is greater in Middletown. Derry has PA American Water and PPL electric. Harrisburg City does no utility work at their Communications Center.

The Middletown Communications Center has long been a debate. For the amount of services offered and provided versus the minor cost, it is an easy business decision. Recall that the whole department only costs the average household a couple of dollars per year, and replacing it would cost several dollars more. This is a small, inexpensive, and vitally important operation.

14. Would we not save money on eliminating the Communications Center employees should the facility close?

The employees of the Middletown Communications Center are members of Teamsters Local 776 and, as such, would have the ability to transfer and displace other less-senior employees in any Borough department. Ultimately some employees would find themselves unemployed, and the Borough would be responsible for paying unemployment compensation for upwards of one year or more. As we are uninsured for unemployment compensation, this additional expense would, for some time, continue to cost the Borough money. However, eventually, unemployment benefits would stop. The cost of unemployment compensation would itself eliminate any financial benefit from closing the Communications Center for at least one or two years.

Further, there is no reason to believe that the clerical work done by the Communications Center employees can be absorbed by existing personnel. Many other towns that do not operate communications centers have many more civilian employees in their police departments. This is true of Susquehanna Township and Lower Paxton Township, who alone has fourteen civilian employees in their Police Department to our one (Police Secretary) employee.

Finally, the Police Department's computer, telephone, and radio budget is covered by the Communications Center and those expenses could not be eliminated regardless. Therefore, a significant portion of the Communications Center budget would remain even without employees or other services.

In summary, the Borough Council would be faced with expensive and complex choices should the Communications Center close. For example, if the Communications Center were closed, Council's priority decisions would include how to handle the monitoring of prisoners by the Middletown Police Department, where to send all the phone calls for the Communications Center (numbering over 100,000), and the cost and problems of handling the displacement of current employees. Because the Communications Center handles all the computers, paperwork, telephones, and radios for the police, there is no doubt that either police office staff would have to be added (as in Lower Paxton or Susquehanna Township) and/or additional police and police overtime would be mandated at huge expense.

The Communications Center represents 2.2% of the total operating budget for the Borough of Middletown. The Communications Center employees are some of the lowest-paid employees within the Borough. As work arises, its staff will be capable of taking on more tasks as the Manager and Council sees fit. Finally, the Communications Center saves us from other more costly expenses.

Ultimately, to close the Communications Center would result in a tax increase and less customer service. It just makes no sense.