

Update on Fire Dept and EMS Dispatch Procedure Review

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Tonight I will discuss the standard operating procedures currently used by Lee County Sheriff's office dispatch to notify local Volunteer Fire Departments and Lee County EMS when emergency services are needed to any location in Lee county. These guidelines are right now under review by the Sheriff's office and a committee from Giddings and Lexington Volunteer Fire Departments. I have obtained a preliminary version of the dispatch procedures being recommended by the Fire Chiefs and will compare these with the procedures that have been in place since October, 2014.

The October, 2014, guidelines are a bit of a mix of instructions for both Sheriff's dispatch and responding Fire Departments. A primary cause of concern about these procedures is that the burden of requesting mutual aid from other Fire Departments and Emergency Responders often falls on the Incident Commander in charge of the emergency scene. In some cases, after the initial call out, no more aid is dispatched to the scene unless specifically requested by the Incident Commander. This procedure has caused delay in dispatching additional assets until the Incident Commander arrives on scene and assesses operational needs.

This delay can be a significant problem, especially when the emergency call involves motor vehicle accidents, which unfortunately occur frequently on State Highways 21 and 77, and US Highway 290. Are multiple cars involved? Is anyone trapped in a vehicle? Will EMS be needed? The current Sheriff's dispatch guidelines generally place responsibility for requesting additional assets to the Incident Commander and thus must wait until someone actually arrives on scene.

Current guidelines do call for automatic dispatch of a supporting Fire Department in case of Structure Fire or in case of a Wildland Fire if we under a burn ban. For motor vehicle accidents the local Volunteer Fire Department is called, but no consideration is given about the ability of that Fire Department to actually address the needs on scene. Calling out Fedor Fire Department will get help with a fire or with traffic control, at best, so dispatch must be aware of the present limitations or capabilities of each Fire Department. This is asking a lot of Sheriff's dispatchers and probably why the current system relies on the Incident Commander to actually initiate many requests for assistance.

The focus of the committee proposing revisions to the current dispatch guidelines, and of the Sheriff's office under new Sheriff Casey Goetz, is to utilize recent upgrades in Geographic Information Systems to pre-program local Fire Department and EMS dispatch protocols. Then the Dispatcher simply clicks on a specific location, chooses the type of emergency call they received, and the dispatch system automatically directs call outs to the agencies and assets needed for this type of emergency in this exact locale.

A specific instance of the value of such a system could be a motor vehicle accident on FM 1624 involving a vehicle roll-over. Fedor Fire Department is called out because the accident is in their fire area. Lincoln Fire Department is called out because they possess the skills and equipment for extrication from a vehicle. EMS is called out because the vehicle accident is a roll-over and likely

there are injuries to the vehicle occupants. All of this is automatic and based on the Dispatcher's setting a pin at a specific location on their GIS screen.

In this system the first arriving Incident Commander can then radio dispatch to cancel the call outs for assistance from other agencies that will not be needed. During our quarterly county Fire Chief's meeting in April it was made abundantly clear to Sheriff Goetz that every Fire Chief prefers to get the initial call out, then be canceled while en route, rather than wait for someone to arrive on scene and then radio dispatch to ask for their assistance.

At present, as I understand it, the Sheriff is leaning on his IT provider to supply an electronic version of their GIS map for Fire Chief's committee use in establishing geographic boundaries and associated protocols for pre-programming into the Sheriff's dispatch computer system. Upon completion, this new set of dispatch procedures and GIS linkages will greatly enhance the efficiency of dispatch calls for Fire Department, EMS and other emergency response agencies in Lee County.