

## Public Hearing

### Proposed Dissolution of Troy Area Dispatch District and Permanent Transfer of Dispatch Services to the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office October 18, 2023 6:00 PM at 310 E. Kootenai Ave. Troy, MT 59923

Present were Commissioner Teske, Commissioner Hammons, Commissioner Letcher, Sheriff Darren Short, Undersheriff Brent Faulkner and Clerk and Recorder Corrina Brown

6:00 PM **Public Hearing: Proposed Dissolution of Troy Area Dispatch District:** Present were Evan Camella, Sylvia Maffit, Scott Shindledecker, Bobbie Scott, Linda Rodriguez, Leanna Smith, Larry Smith, Nikki Steiger, Stephanie Jellesed, Denise Kalb, Debbie Short, Tara Letcher, Chuck Ekstedt, Glenn L Garrison, Barbara Pence, Paul Olson, Katie Davis and Ben Fisher.

Commissioner Letcher opened the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance followed by reading Resolution 2023-36, a resolution to dissolve the Troy Area Dispatch District and permanently transfer dispatch services to the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office. Commissioner Hammons advised he has attended two past meetings at the High School where they identified the need for help in Troy Dispatch and on its Board yet this didn't materialize. This is the reason we are gathered here tonight. As commissioners we prioritize public safety, ultimately, we must ensure a dispatch service that is both safe and dependable. The majority of the concerns I've heard pertain to communication, and the Sheriff's Office has dedicated considerable effort to address this issue. I encourage you to share your thoughts on these matters and how we can enhance communication to safeguard everyone effectively. Please assist us in identifying ways to improve the service for residents within the district. Commissioner Teske agreed that sums it up. **Motion** to approve Resolution 2023-36 by Commissioner Hammons. Second by Commissioner Teske. No further comments by elected officials. Commissioner Letcher opened the meeting to public comments: \*note: written comments are available at the Clerk & Recorder's office.

Denise Kalb is concerned with communication issues. The dispatches from Libby are not being heard clearly by first responders. In my situation, I called 911 and it rang busy twice. We couldn't get through, so my husband had to take me to the hospital. Upon speaking with the sheriff's office, it was revealed that there are several phones that may not directly connect you to 911; sometimes it routes to a remote 911. We must inform people of this issue and collaborate to find a solution. We should explore methods to bypass this and ensure prompt service. This marks a significant change, and we must work on awareness in our community. While we have experienced excellent emergency service responses in recent years, they are currently hindered by communication difficulties on radios and the fact that our phones may not function as intended. Improving community awareness and advocating for better radio communications is imperative.

Glenn Garrison raised a couple of concerns. Many elders do not have access to computers, and radio and phone signals often fail in wooded areas. As a school bus driver, we rely on Troy Dispatch to report incidents such as deer on the road, icy conditions, or downed trees along the route. Will Libby now handle this responsibility, and if we can't reach Libby, who will cover in their absence? In the past, Troy and Libby used to provide backup for each other during overruns. The dissolution of Troy Dispatch has been ongoing for fifteen or more years, and most of the meetings I've attended emphasized that we wouldn't be receiving any additional dispatchers. However, I've heard that Libby has managed to do so. I'm grateful to Sheriff Short for allowing our dispatchers in Troy to dispatch from there and then contact the Sheriff's Office to get things underway. I always wondered why when you called 911 and got Troy, there wasn't a straightforward menu like "press one for Troy, press two for Troy Rural, and press three for Libby Sheriff's Office" before speaking to anyone. The three individuals who decided to shut down dispatch were handpicked, and this worries me. I'm particularly concerned about the safety of teenage girls being followed at night. They used to have two safe places in Troy they could go to, either Town Pump or here at Dispatch, both open all night.

Bobbie Scott, an ambulance volunteer, informed us about individuals approaching members of Emergency Services with complaints of 911 lines being busy or experiencing lengthy wait times only to be connected with someone unrelated to Libby Dispatch after ten minutes. When people call, they should be promptly directed to dispatch without delay. Could we potentially rearrange the options? For instance, have Sheriff as option 1, Dispatch as option 2, and place the other options like Jail and Detention afterward. I'm aware they are taking over communications. I reside out on Bull Lake and respond for both Troy and Bull Lake. Unfortunately, there are times when either I can't hear them or they can't hear me. I find myself waiting for E-dispatch to come through before being able to communicate effectively.

Stephanie Jellesed advised my husband has been a member of the Troy Volunteer Fire Department for 15 years and has recently joined the Troy Volunteer Ambulance as well. Throughout those 15 years, we have never encountered any communication issues. However, being just outside of town, when dispatches come through the radio, we're unable to hear anything unless it also comes across his phone. This creates uncertainty as he waits to see who has responded, and they don't know who is being dispatched to the barn or if anyone is showing up. It's frustrating not being able to hear Libby Dispatch on the other end. Before we had protocols with helicopter landing sites, now they landed near full dumpsters and the Fire Department told them to move but they responded their dispatch said to land there. \*Troy Police Chief Davis later advised this was a communication issue on the part of helicopter dispatch referencing the old dumpster site.

Leanna Smith, I work at Kootenai Falls and reside near the Stateline. I've encountered difficulties when trying to call 911; it simply won't go through. And when I do manage to reach someone, I'm asked a series of questions that are not pertinent to the situation. In our area, where cell service is practically non-existent, and computer Wi-Fi access is unreliable, we heavily rely on our landlines. It's frustrating when you can't effectively communicate with the person on the other end. When I was working, if I couldn't reach Libby Dispatch due to their lines being busy or unable to answer the 911 call, I could call Troy, bypassing other channels, and they would promptly respond by sending someone out. This was immensely helpful, as it provided a sense of security and eliminated unnecessary worries. Now, there's uncertainty about whether I'll be directed to call the highway patrol for certain situations and needs to be taken into consideration. Knowing I could call here and receive a dependable, immediate response instilled confidence. In many instances, where we live, we have to take matters into our own hands, as we can't always rely on emergency services.

Sylvia Maffit, last week, my son was walking our dog on the mountain behind our house and discovered a suitcase and boots, which raised some concern. He returned, and I called the non-emergency dispatch number. However, every button I chose was the wrong one. I went down to City Hall and found the office open. I informed them that I needed a police officer. Police Chief Davis arrived within two minutes and handled the situation. However, it was frustrating for me because all I needed was a police officer. Another question I have is how were the individuals chosen to dismantle dispatch? There were three people, I believe, appointed by Commissioner Hammons.

Glenn Garrison, hypothetically, if someone were to pass away due to a lack of service or the inability to get through, would Lincoln County Libby Dispatch bear some liability? Sheriff Short responded, stating that it depends on the reason for not getting through. In his 25-year career, he has never witnessed a 911 call go unanswered in the dispatch center. However, the call must reach them. This was the

issue Denise faced; her call never even reached the tower. Undersheriff Faulkner has spent three days grappling with various cell phone providers, Solcom and no one in charge of 911 sees that phone call even trying to reach the tower. Undersheriff Faulkner explained that whether it's Eureka, Troy, or Libby dispatch, if it doesn't hit the tower, it won't get routed. One point of frustration is that if it's a busy signal, it's not reaching the tower. Regarding the ten-minute delays that have been discussed, if the call does reach the tower and is routed to the national call center, it could be directed to Colorado, Canada, or elsewhere. If it never reaches our 911 Center, how can our dispatch be held responsible for the ten-minute delay? Undersheriff Faulkner commented that this is a cell phone and VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) issue, not a dispatch problem. We've examined one call from Troy and three from Libby, all of which have encountered technology-related problems in reaching a PSAP (Public Safety Answering Point), whether due to provider or device issues. Dispatch never generates busy tones; it simply doesn't happen. Sheriff Short pointed out that even if a dispatcher is on a 911 call, it will still ring through. There are two separate call stations, and it will ring through. Even if something were to go wrong with their 911 call system, if it got routed to the 911 call system, it would bounce to the next available dispatch center. We are working to involve the right people to rectify this on their end. Undersheriff Faulkner mentioned that a specific VOIP service currently routes calls not to them, but to a call center, which then warm transfers it to them with a person. This causes a delay, and people mistakenly think they are on hold, when in reality, the call center is trying to reach us. Today, in my research, I found one of the major providers for the 911 system in Montana said this doesn't sound right. There's no reason why these companies can't directly route these calls into the 911 system and bypass that other call center. That's what we're now aiming for, but it's a complex technological endeavor, requiring constant attention. This is the business of managing a PSAP.

Sheriff Short addressed the radio system. It's important to note that you're being reached through the same radios that have always been in use. There's a fiber optic connection linking the Libby Dispatch Center with the radio equipment right here in a room. The radios in this room have been in service for eleven years. It's worth mentioning that these radios were never of commercial grade quality. Our radio technician from Kalispell recommends replacing these radios every five years. Unfortunately, we are connected to outdated, obsolete radios that are no longer even serviceable. One issue we encountered was with the EMS radio, which was failing, to band aid that they put in an amplifier which failed. After we took over, our Kalispell radio technician came in, identified the amplifier failure, and removed it from the system, reverting to the underpowered, failing EMS radio. Just today, a brand new 100-watt radio has been installed on the EMS side of this dispatch center, and radio checks and test pages are being conducted. Gold Communications from Kalispell is currently providing pricing for the replacement of the radios and addressing tower concerns in this dispatch center. Sheriff Short clarified each EMS organization seeking replacement handheld radios will be responsible for securing funding, whether through grants or donations. Commissioner Teske recommended reaching out to Tom Lane at the EMA office to request an application for the Homeland Security Grant, as they recognize the radios have a specific life cycle. Sheriff Short emphasized that transitioning from about 35 to 100-watt radio will have a substantial impact. Undersheriff Faulkner reported the fire siren is once again operational and is radio controlled from Libby. Sheriff Short advised all the 911 calls are still being routed into the Troy 911 call handling equipment which is at least three years out of date and then they are being transferred to Libby Dispatch. Once this resolution is approved those calls will immediately be routed to the newer call handling equipment at Libby Dispatch. Undersheriff Faulkner mentioned there is an extensive list of tasks at local, state and federal level for that integration of the two districts. Undersheriff Faulkner advised the phone tree is a business line for non-emergency calls 293-4112 ext. 5. We all deal with phone trees everywhere we call. We have dispatchers and not operators. We found at certain times of the day 50% of the calls just want to reach the jail. Another one was concealed weapons and in the end the percentage of calls needing handled at dispatch level was very small. The goal was to put those called up in the tree, numbered according to call volume. If you listen you will get through it. There are a lot of offices at the Sheriff's Office and the decision had to be made that dispatch is not the operator. This is irritating until it's understood but has made a big impact on Dispatch. Sheriff Short advised Troy PD and city offices are going to continue to use the 4111 line. Maybe a second line can be used, that is 295-4112, to dial direct to the dispatch center. Sheriff Short advised once this resolution happens the mailers and messages will go out and the 911 calls be routed directly to Libby Dispatch.

Glenn Garrison inquired of a list of repeaters for the different areas. Sheriff Short said yes, the local government repeaters are King, Yaak and Baldy Mountain. If you are within radio service of here it will hit that antenna and go directly by fiber to Libby Dispatch.

Undersheriff Faulkner advised they talked with the Fire Chiefs on their preferred zones and dropped them right into their GIS map. Dispatchers don't determine the zone, the IC on the scene does. Dispatchers may be told by Alert or Two Bear exactly where they want to land and may relay it but no dispatchers make that decision. Our dispatch center talks to their dispatch center and never the pilot.

Sylvia Maffit raised a question about the appointment process for the Troy Dispatch Board members. She was aware two of them held strong anti-dispatch sentiments, which raised concerns. The Undersheriff explained that the two City-appointed members of the board had indicated they would recommend dissolution, but they ultimately chose not to be involved and resigned. Commissioner Teske clarified that all three Commissioners voted to appoint the three County-appointed members to the Troy Dispatch Board.

Sheriff Short outlined the persistent staffing issues and excessive duty shifts that have involved the Sheriff's Office assistance for months leading up to this decision. He acknowledged the challenges and stated they are making the best of the situation they've been handed. Undersheriff Faulkner agreed this transition was brought up maybe ten years ago but was rejected by the public. He also pointed out former dispatch board members will note they struggled over the past two to three years, with the situation exacerbated by personnel issues over the last year. Sheriff Short advised we all go forward from here figuring out which radios need replaced and get top notch commercial radios, figure out the antenna situation and make sure every emergency responder has clear, concise and consistent communication.

Sheriff Short, any further questions?

Commissioner Letcher expressed gratitude for everyone's comments and attendance and thanked the Sheriff's Office for their informative presentation. He then called for a vote on approving Resolution 2023-36. The motion passed unanimously.

Sheriff Short requested that anyone in emergency services facing issues contact them promptly, emphasizing that if they aren't aware of the problems, they won't be able to address and resolve them.

07:10 PM **Adjourned**

## **LINCOLN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

---

Josh Letcher, Chairman

**ATTEST:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Corrina Brown, Clerk of the Board