



# STAFF REPORT

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October 11, 2023

File Number 0600-10; A-3479

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## SUBJECT

**APPROVAL OF THE CITY'S MEMBERSHIP TO THE NORTH COUNTY DISPATCH JOINT POWERS AUTHORITY AND EXECUTION OF THE JOINT EXERCISE OF POWERS AGREEMENT FOR THE PROVISION OF FIRE DEPARTMENT DISPATCHING SERVICES**

## DEPARTMENT

Fire

## RECOMMENDATION

Request the City Council adopt Resolution No. 2023-95 approving the City of Escondido ("City") becoming a Member Agency of the North County Dispatch Joint Powers Authority ("NCDJPA") and authorizing the Mayor, on behalf of the City, to execute the attached Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement with NCDJPA for the provision of Fire Department dispatching services.

Staff Recommendation: Approval and File (Fire Department: John Tenger, Fire Chief)

Presenter: John Tenger, Fire Chief; Jeff Sargis, Deputy Fire Chief; Ed Varso, Police Chief

## FISCAL ANALYSIS

As a result of membership, the City will receive 12 months of dispatching service at no cost and there will be no startup costs due to NCDJPA. However, the Fire Department will incur expenses of approximately \$50,000 to configure the fire station alerting systems and establish mobile data computer connectivity. After the first 12 months of service, the annual ongoing cost for NCDJPA membership is expected to be \$1,070,000 and will be encumbered by the Fire Department's Maintenance and Operating Budget. Annual service costs are based on Escondido Fire call volume as a percentage of the total cost to operate the NCDJPA.

In addition, the City of Escondido will pay for NCDJPA to hire 3 additional Fire Communications Dispatchers as a result of the increase in calls directly related to the City of Escondido joining NCDJPA. Additionally, joining NCDJPA as a Member Agency is not anticipated to result in the elimination of any existing positions within the City's Police Department.

At the end of the first 12 months, NCDJPA staff will perform an analysis to determine the actual cost incurred related to the 3 additional Fire Communications Dispatchers. The cost of this one-time expense is expected to be \$390,000 and will be encumbered by the Fire Department's budget and payed over four years at \$97,500 per year with no interest. The cost of the 3 positions beginning in year 2 would be included in NCDJPA's general operating budget and assessed to all agencies.



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It is anticipated the Fire Department will begin receiving actual dispatching services from the NCDJPA in January of 2024.

### **PREVIOUS ACTION**

None.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The City of Escondido Fire Department currently receives dispatch services from the City of Escondido Police Department. When Escondido Fire requires additional resources in the form of mutual or automatic aid for large or multiple incidents, the City of Escondido Dispatch Center dispatches Escondido emergency personnel to the scene, then calls the NCDJPA Dispatch Center to request additional resources to be dispatched from surrounding communities.

While Escondido's current dispatch delivery system was common in the past, Escondido is now the only jurisdiction that uses this arrangement in San Diego County. All other fire departments in San Diego County are dispatched by one of four regional dispatch centers dedicated to fire and emergency medical services. Although maintaining dispatch services in-house in Escondido brings with it a sense of pride, it can fail to satisfy public expectations of modern-day emergency services that are better leveraged through a regional dispatch center. Furthermore, Escondido dispatchers are required to perform as both police and fire dispatchers, which are very different in nature, cadence, language, and scope.

NCDJPA, also known as North Comm, is a regional fire Dispatch Center that serves northern San Diego County, an area also referred to as the North Zone. The benefit of Escondido joining NCDJPA will be improved and enhanced service levels to the public and first responders. These changes would improve firefighter safety, improve response times both in areas of Escondido that are farther from our fire stations and for incidents that require significant mutual aid resources, provide opportunities to adjust our service delivery model within a robust system of care, and leverage the operational and technological advantages already being used by NCDJPA member agencies.

### **BACKGROUND**

NCDJPA was formed in July 1984 as a regional fire and emergency medical services dispatch center. Current members include the cities of Carlsbad, Encinitas, Oceanside, San Marcos, Solana Beach, Vista, plus the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District, and North County Fire Protection District (Fallbrook). In addition, the NCDJPA provides contracted dispatch services to the CSA-17 Ambulance District, Rancho Santa Fe Security Patrol, and fire departments serving the communities of Del Mar, Pala, Pauma, Rincon, San Pasqual, and Valley Center. NCDJPA is financially stable (as are its member agencies), has significant reserves, and has been at or near 100% funding of their PERS liability for the past 4 years. The City of



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Escondido Fire Department remains the only non-participating agency in the northern San Diego County region.

Besides serving as the primary dispatch center for its member agencies, the NCDJPA dispatch center also serves as the San Diego County Operational Area dispatch center under the California Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid Plan. As the Operational Area dispatch center, NCDJPA coordinates the assignment of San Diego County local government and California Office of Emergency Services (OES) resources to incidents throughout the region and the state as part of the California OES Mutual Aid system. These duties require NCDJPA dispatchers to provide daily reports on the status of all resources available in the Operational Area for mutual aid assignments, provision assignments based on availability, and continually track assigned resources. Member Agencies receiving dispatch services from NCDJPA benefit from the direct connection with the state when mutual aid resources are needed. In addition, the experience from being the Operational Area Dispatch Center gives North Comm dispatchers and support staff extensive experience in large scale emergency resource organization and mobilization.

The NCDJPA dispatch center is located next to Rancho Santa Fe Fire District Station 1. They employ 35 staff members, including 22 dispatchers and supervisors, plus administrative staff providing finance and human resources work, support staff providing data analytics, GIS, IT, and radio support, as well as a four-person management team lead by the administrator. North Comm has been looking for several years at finding a new building somewhere in North San Diego County that is central in the North Zone.

The NCDJPA Board of Directors (BOD) is comprised of one elected official from each member agency, with each member having an equal vote. The Fire Chiefs of the respective agencies serve in an advisory capacity to the BOD and NCDJPA Administrator. Typically, the Fire Chiefs meet as a group once a month to discuss operational issues and develop recommendations for future agenda items. The NCDJPA Fire Chief meetings take place at various locations in the North Zone region. The Chiefs individually brief their respective board members prior to the quarterly BOD meetings, which are held on the 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday in February, May, August, and November at 10 a.m. at a Member Agency's council chambers. BOD meetings in 2023 will be held at Oceanside City Hall.

### **Operational Advantages:**

An immediate operational advantage of Escondido City joining the NCDJA will be the ability of NCDJPA to immediately dispatch the closest unit(s) to an emergency scene regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. Under this scenario, the NCDJPA's Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system will select for dispatch those available units that are closest to the scene of an emergency, using their automatic vehicle location (AVL)



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and call routing systems. This will result in emergency personnel from another agency responding to an incident in our community or vice versa, reducing response times. This would most likely occur when the primary unit responding from our City is already on a call. Response time savings could range from thirty seconds to more than three minutes. In addition, utilizing the NCDJPA regional dispatch center will give the City the ability to analyze the effect boundary drops would have on future response areas and service levels.

Reduced response times to incidents involving mutual aid and automatic aid will also be realized as a result of joining the NCDJPA (although proportionately, they are a small percentage of our total call volume). Automatic aid is an agreement by adjoining Member Agencies to provide an emergency response into a neighboring jurisdiction for an incident that requires significant emergency response resources. The criteria for these automatic aid response agreements are then programmed into the NCDJPA CAD system to automatically select the necessary compliment of emergency resources (from local and surrounding jurisdictions) to respond to a particular incident. Dispatching needed emergency resources from multiple jurisdictions at the same time by the NCDJPA Dispatch Center will shave up to approximately two minutes off the dispatching time for units responding into certain location in our community and an equivalent amount of time when Escondido is requested to respond to an incident in a certain area of a neighboring community. Currently, when Escondido requires assistance in the form of mutual or automatic aid, our Dispatch Center first dispatches Escondido emergency personnel to the scene, then calls the NCDJPA Dispatch Center to request that additional resources be dispatched from surrounding communities resulting in longer dispatch times.

NCDJPA offers the ability to constantly monitor the command radio channel on significant incidents. Ideally, on a major incident, the Incident Commander (IC) establishes communication on both a command and a tactical channel separate from the dispatch channel, to avoid overwhelming the dispatch channel. The command channel is used by the IC to organize resources on scene, contact the dispatcher to request additional resources, and by field personnel to contact the IC. By segregating communications by operational purpose on the scene of an incident, safety and efficiency are improved. Due to call volume workloads associated with handling both fire and police calls at the Escondido Dispatch Center, the fire dispatcher serves as backup to the 9-1-1 call taker and the police dispatcher. This does not allow time for the fire dispatcher to constantly monitor the command channel on significant incidents for resource requests from the IC, log significant events into CAD or monitor changes in the severity of the incident. Thereby requiring the incident commander to communicate with dispatch via the dispatch channel. NCDJPA has a minimum of 4 dispatchers on-duty, daytime staffing of 6 and peak period staffing of 7. This allows dispatchers to be dedicated to command channels and even tactical channels during working incidents. This provides for better communication between the dispatcher and the IC, as the dispatcher



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can listen to how the incident is progressing and anticipate the types of requests that will be made by the IC.

Concentrating all northern San Diego fire agencies onto a single Dispatch Center improves dispatcher confidence and performance. By routing fire, rescue, and medical emergencies to a single Dispatch Center, the NCDJPA dispatchers are able to focus their efforts in maintaining their skills in the specialized field of fire dispatching. By contrast, due to the sheer volume of Escondido's Police radio traffic (90%), as compared to Escondido's fire calls (10%), Escondido dispatchers spend the vast majority of their time responding to police related calls. This provides them with few opportunities to practice and exercise their skills to be efficient and confident fire and emergency medical dispatchers. This is especially true when it comes to the high-risk low-frequency fires that exceed a first alarm response. The NCDJPA dispatchers have a much greater opportunity to maintain their skills providing pre-arrival medical instructions and in dispatching mutual and automatic aid requests. Conversely, by eliminating the need for training dispatchers in both police and fire dispatching protocols, Escondido Dispatch Center's personnel will be able to concentrate their efforts on their primary function as police dispatchers. This will eliminate the need for fire-related training, continuing education, and medical dispatching quality improvement programs, greatly shortening the training time needed for Escondido's dispatchers. This will have a positive effect on recruitment and retention.

As the number of emergency calls that are medical in nature continues to rise each year, it has become obvious that the Escondido Fire Department should not continue to dispatch a Fire Engine and Paramedic Rescue Ambulance to every call for help. Through the Fire Department Quality Assurance and Improvement Program it has become clear that 30 to 40 percent of requests for medical aid can be appropriately managed with fewer personnel and personnel with a lower level of medical licensure. The logical solution is to match the required resources to each individual situation.

Tiered dispatch is the process by which call takers triage requests for medical aid with a series of questions designed to determine the level of response required to adequately manage the situation described by the caller. Once the call taker arrives at a computer generated "Determinant Code" the call can be transmitted to the appropriate units for response. In the tiered dispatch model, high acuity calls will continue to receive the current response (Fire Engine and Paramedic Rescue Ambulance). However, lower acuity requests would receive a response consisting of fewer personnel and/or Basic Life Support ambulance staffed by Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT), who have a lower level of medical licensure than Paramedics. The response level is based on the "Determinant Code" in order to send the right resources to the right patient at the right time.



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While the Escondido Police and Fire Communication Center personnel have proven very capable of arriving at proper “Determinant Codes” (98% accuracy rate), the time demand placed on call takers is significant. With high call volumes and increased attention required for each request for medical aid, our short-staffed Communication Center is taxed by the demands of this complex system of resource allocation. Additionally, requests for medical aids are less than 10% of the Communication Centers overall workload. This requires call takers and dispatcher to constantly switch from one mode of operation to another. Medical aids are handled differently than fires, both are handled differently than police calls.

NCDJPA implemented their tiered dispatch call handling in July 2021, including auto-voice (similar to Escondido) and auto-dispatch functionality. The latter functionality is programmed into the CAD system, so that as soon as a call taker enters an incident into the system it is dispatched without dispatcher intervention. NCDJPA analysis showed this saved an average of 12 seconds per incident, reducing the overall response time to emergencies. Part of the NCDJPA tiered dispatch system includes quality assurance reviews of random and targeted incidents by a dedicated staff member with certification in such analysis.

NCDJPA Member Agencies also enjoy several enhanced levels of service and technology that the combined power of the JPA brings versus agencies trying to do so on their own. NCDJPA provides IT staff, GIS staff, a data analyst, and a radio technician who all directly support their Member Agencies. This group performs maintenance on MDCs, coordinates the station alerting system, maintains mapping data, creates pre-plans, assists executive staff with reporting for city councils or city managers, as well as LAFCO reporting and standards of cover analysis, and maintains VHF radio sites. This will also drastically reduce the workload on Escondido’s IS department.

NCDJPA Member Agencies have access to Tablet Command, an app that shows both list and map views of active incidents throughout the region. Member Agencies have used this program to provide real-time situational awareness not only to fire department staff but to executive city management staff, including city managers and finance directors. They also have access to LiveMUM Mobile, a real-time tool that is available to chief officers’ mobile devices to show unit availability across the North Zone. NCDJPA dispatchers also use LiveMUM, a sophisticated program that uses two years of incident data and forecasting to recommend when and where to move fire units from one station to another in order to provide better coverage when major incidents or activity levels require it, improving resource management.

An additional advantage of Escondido joining NCDJPA will be in the increased opportunities for regional



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coordination. Escondido already participates in North Zone committee meetings, including operations, training, and EMS. However, we are not included in some executive level meetings that only NCDJPA Member Agencies attend. Collaboration at this level has often been the birthplace of efforts that ultimately improve efficiencies, eliminate redundancy, and improve specialization.

Finally, as previously mentioned, Escondido Fire is the only North County City not participating in the NCDJPA. This conversion would result in a single, regional fire Dispatch Center for the North Zone serving all of north San Diego County (such as the Heartland Dispatch JPA does in the east county). This will allow the NCDJPA to allocate all the North Zone resources in a timely and coordinated manner in the event of a major disaster or significant incident requiring resources from multiple agencies. It will also provide for better communications at the scene of major incidents by providing a single command center that can quickly be staffed with a chief officer to coordinate the utilization of North Zone agency resources. A rotating on-call list for a fire operation chief from a NCDJPA member agency is in place. Whenever a major incident occurs, including working 2-alarm fires or greater, the duty chief is assigned to the NCDJPA Dispatch Center to provide additional management level oversight of incident coordination, as well as to act as a liaison to all fire departments in the North Zone. This is in contrast to a simple communications center that only facilitates requests by field personnel, whereas a "command center" (such as the NCDJPA) has the ability to manage regional resource deployments to major incidents.

### **Alternatives:**

The only viable alternative is to continue to be dispatched through the Escondido Dispatch Center. With the increase in call volume from both police and fire/EMS calls this would necessitate the hiring of two additional dispatchers in order to maintain a minimum of four dispatchers (one call taker, one police dispatcher, one fire dispatcher and one supervisor to an already taxed system) on a 24-hour basis. In addition, one full-time Emergency Medical Dispatch Quality Assurance supervisor (EMDQA supervisor) would need to be added to assist with the comprehensive development of the "Tiered Dispatch" model. Lastly, improvement in orientation, training, and emergency medical dispatch quality improvement programs would need to be enhanced.

In theory, with the addition of personnel and training, the level of service provided by Escondido's Dispatch Center could approach that provided by the NCDJPA. However, the mentioned operational advantages of consolidating the North County region into one fire Dispatch Center cannot be achieved by continuing to maintain our own Dispatch Center separate from the regions.

### **RESOLUTIONS**



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- a. Resolution No. 2023-95

### **ATTACHMENTS**

- a. Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement between the North County Dispatch Joint Powers Authority and the City of Escondido
- b. Board of Directors of the North County Dispatch Joint Powers Authority Resolution 23-08