

911 dispatch center tax would boost staffing, future tech needs

By **Cody Hooks**, chooks@taosnews.com

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Come Valentine's Day, Taos County voters will decide whether or not to take on a new tax that would permanently fund the 911 dispatch center.

Adding the tax would bump up Taos County's already-high rates. But the director of the 911 center and county manager argue that the tax would lend the dispatch center some needed stability in the face of ongoing staffing concerns and technological upgrades.

Money

The "countywide emergency communications gross receipts tax" (GRT) would be added to all purchases made in Taos County. It would add about 18 cents to a \$100 purchase, or a rate of .1875 percent.

Taos County Manager Leandro Cordova has forecasted that the tax could routinely bring in \$850,000 to \$870,000 a year. Dominic Martinez, director of the center, told *The Taos News* that in a good snow year with better-than-average tourism, the tax could rake in as much as \$1 million.

Taos County and the town of Taos contribute the vast majority of the current budget for the dispatch center, which currently stands at about \$720,000 a year. Each government pays \$340,000 a year, with additional money coming in from Taos Ski Valley, Questa, Taos Pueblo and Angel Fire.

Martinez said a dedicated source of funding, rather than yearly allotments by local governments, would keep the center "out of the political limelight," such as in the years leading up to the opening of the new dispatch center.

Staffing

The central argument for the tax, according to Martinez, is making sure the state-of-the-art dispatch center is actually staffed full time.

"I'm always asking for more money for another position," Martinez said.

When Martinez first came on as director of the dispatch center in early 2015, the county employed only seven dispatchers. By October of that year, it was up to 11. As of this week, 12 dispatchers work at the center, one position shy of being fully staffed, he said.

Martinez said he's always got three people working the dispatch consoles at any given time, though four would be "the ideal." He and his administrative deputy "hop on the radio" when the center is short a few people — a not-uncommon scenario, he said.

“Of course, we still fall into overtime,” Martinez said, even though dispatchers work a 12-hour shift. In April, the Taos County Board of Commissioners put another \$6,000 into the dispatch budget to account for overtime. At the time, that brought the overtime budget for the last fiscal year up to \$63,000.

While overtime pay has been reduced in the last year, Martinez said he’s still hoping to up his dispatchers’ salary to be more competitive with other centers around the state, hopefully eliminating the problem of training dispatchers, only to have them move away to a better-paid job within a year or so of being hired.

A starting dispatcher can make about \$12 an hour. A dispatcher who has been on the job for a year can earn up to \$13 an hour. While those rates are on par with Taos’ neighboring counties, they don’t stack up against Albuquerque or oil-rich San Juan County, he said.

“I was a cop for 20 years. I know what it’s like to be low paid and not be able to buy a house. I want my dispatchers to actually be able to make a career out of this. The younger folks, yeah, they’ve got ties to the community, but they could probably leave and make more money down south. I just don’t want to lose these people,” Martinez said.

Technology

In addition to retaining employees, the tax would ensure that the technology the county paid \$1.3 million for about two years ago stays up to date.

The dispatch center mostly consists of three consoles, or a bank of computers that link together multiple maps, the radios themselves and various softwares that are integral to a functioning center.

The radios alone cost \$75,000 each. The county commission recently put up \$45,000 to complement a U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security grant to purchase a fourth radio.

Some of the routine maintenance for the technology at the dispatch center was built into the initial purchase costs. But that will not last for long, according to Martinez.

“The maintenance isn’t lagging right now, but it’s going to be. We’re going to have to start paying those costs on the radios and software. There’s going to be increases. I don’t think [Taos County and the town of Taos] will be able to contribute enough to cover some of these expenses,” he said.

Indeed, the county suffered a string of technological crises throughout 2016. County Manager Cordova has said the issues were the result of delayed maintenance because those costs hadn’t been built into the budget since the county complex was built. The issues over the past year have not impacted the dispatch center, Cordova has said, because they are on a dedicated server.

Resistance

If the special election last March to fund capital improvements at Holy Cross Hospital is any indication, the communications tax could easily win. The hospital tax passed in a landslide, with more than 75 percent voting in favor. However, that was a mill levy (property tax) and the hospital had an aggressive campaign to help it pass.

Commissioner Candyce O’Donnell has voted against the tax when procedural votes have come before the commission.

“[County] revenues are going to continue to rise and we have a healthy [911] fund. We can manage as is without any other taxes. I do not think it’s fair when we’re burdening our citizens with a mill levy and Kit Carson [Electric Co-op’s rate increase],” O’Donnell said in October.

“I don’t say we’re doing good [financially] and I don’t say we’re great. I say we’re doing OK,” Martinez said. He also argues that future advancement in regional 911 will require a “nice nest egg.”

NextGen911 — a type of dispatch that uses the latest cellular technology and lets people text photos and videos directly to 911 — is the next big advancement on the horizon. But it will take millions of dollars in federal funding and several years to get there, Martinez said.

As with other federal grants, it’s likely the federal money for NextGen911 will have to be matched by local contributions. The technology to do NextGen911 is in place, he said, but only a tax will build up enough money to get there when the federal government moves the gears to implement it.

The particular state law that allows the county to let the voters decide on a communications tax also says this particular tax could be used for other county-operated emergency services, or behavioral health and substance abuse treatments.

O’Donnell questioned Dec. 20 whether the county would be able to use any of the revenue from the tax on substance abuse treatment, such as detox (which the county has yet to find another funding source for). Cordova said that without starting the process over again, the tax can only be used for the dispatch center.



Dominic Martinez, director of the dispatch center (standing), works with telecommunications specialists Jose Mondragon and Eliza Espinosa.

Katharine Egli

