

PRESS RELEASE

Posted 9/1/2010

Emergency Communications (Dispatch)

The City of Houston has fielded several questions regarding the Houston Police Department and how they are dispatched. Hopefully, the following information may address your concerns.

Currently, and historically, the City of Wasilla (MATCOM) provides police dispatch services for the city of Houston. MATCOM also provides police dispatch services for Alaska State Troopers, Wasilla Police, as well as additional after-hours services for other agencies. Fire and rescue are dispatched through the Palmer Dispatch Center (9G Base) as are other agencies such as Mat-Su Borough emergency services and Alaska Mountain Rescue Group.

Houston has paid a percentage of the total bill for all types of emergency services and each year the price of these services has increased. The Houston City Council anticipated a similar situation this year and this was confirmed by the contract for fire and rescue contract with 9G Base with an increase of \$4,000 over last year's fee of \$12,000. However, the services provided by MATCOM proposed an increase of 450%. Last year's fee of \$12,000 was now offered at \$54,000. Negotiations have been on-going since the spring. Houston's budget was finalized in June, which did not reflect the increased police dispatch service fees as negotiations still underway. Small variations are more readily absorbed through amendments to the budget, but this increase is more than can be reasonably absorbed.

The suddenness and surprising increase in charge was unexpected and cannot be attributed to any increase in call volume. In fact, Houston Animal Control was no longer being dispatched which attributed to Houston's decreased call volume along with the reduction of officers utilizing MATCOM's services.

We have been told the reason for the increase was two-fold. First, the Alaska State Troopers did not feel the Houston Police Department paid their fair share. Secondly, we were told that the taxpayers of Wasilla no longer wished to support MATCOM through their general fund and that MATCOM should be fully self-sufficient. In order to cover the costs of MATCOM, each agency using their services was to pay an additional proportional amount to accomplish that goal.

Our response to the first is that the previous bill matched the actual call volume, and to the second concern we have to also protect our constituents and residents who already pay 911 and E911 surcharges through their phone bills for emergency communication services. The City of Wasilla dispatch center sent an ultimatum to either pay the reduced fee of \$52,000 or the emergency communications services will end at 5:00pm on September 16, 2010.

Houston is currently investigating alternatives for emergency police communications. An agreement has been made with the Alaska State Troopers to take all life-threatening 911 calls and Houston Police will assist when and as needed. In exchange, Houston Police Department will take all non-life threatening calls to free up the troopers to handle the more emergent life-threatening calls. This agreement was in place before communications stalled with the city of Wasilla. Among the alternatives under consideration, Houston is looking to contract dispatch services from another

emergency communications center, or to the creation of our own dispatch center. Should a dispatch center be in Houston's future, similar sized communities throughout Alaska have called and given their pledge of support for start-up costs and would like to contract for those services. The second alternative will require time to develop the right plan and will need clear support from the community as this is not an easy decision to jump into.

Houston residents who need non-emergency assistance may be directed to call (907) 892-6447. And as always, in case of an Emergency, call 9-1-1.