

County emergency phone system gaining support

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Nonetheless, it was the kind of incident safety officials believe can be avoided through Oakland County's proposed Enhanced 911 Emergency Dialing System — E-911.

And despite initial qualms, E-911 seems to be gaining support as communities head toward a county-imposed Friday, Dec. 13, sign-up deadline for the Michigan Bell offering.

THUS FAR, 25 communities — including Birmingham, Bloomfield Township, Beverly Hills, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Orchard Lake, Rochester, Rochester Hills and Troy — have given at least conditional approval, according to county emergency services director Paul Phelps.

Bloomfield Hills, Southfield and West Bloomfield are expected to consider the program in the next several days.

"To date, no one has said no," Phelps said. If approved, the system would begin operating by late 1987.

Costs would evenly be divided between the county and participating communities. County commissioners unanimously endorsed the program Sept. 12.

In all, 57 Oakland County communities would pay an average \$7,000 and an average \$5,100 annual operating fee if each community says yes.

What they would get for their money is a computerized telephone service that would automatically notify the appropriate fire, police or emergency services department, while flashing the caller's telephone number on the dispatcher's terminal.

If you're calling from a pay phone on Telegraph Road, you might not know where you are," Bloomfield Township Police Chief Donald Zimmerman said. "With E-911, we'd get the call right away."

Having the caller's telephone number handy serves two other purposes, not the least of which is its potential chilling effect on prank callers, county officials said.

"Knowing their number can be traced should cause them to think twice," Phelps said.

While callers could talk to dispatchers, the number's display is also expected to provide a safeguard in extraordinary situations.

"WE'RE A community of older citizens and, quite frankly, we deal with the problems the older community deals with — including strokes and heart attacks," Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman said.

"The enhanced system will allow us to respond to people who can't communicate with us verbally."

Dispatchers could match published numbers to street addresses by using standard directories. Unpublished numbers could be matched through Michigan Bell's security files, Phelps said.

A random sampling of governmental and public safety officials uncovered little opposition, even in communities that haven't formally joined the program.

"I think our board had some concerns, but the feeling all along was that the E-911 system would be beneficial to everybody," said West Bloomfield Township Supervisor John Doherty, whose community was expected to make a decision shortly after Thanksgiving.

Southfield public safety officials are interested in E-911 even though their community has the county's only 911 system, shared with Oak Park.

"We've continually been looking at ways to improve our own service, even to looking at the possibilities for cable," Southfield public safety director Jerry Tobin said. "While E-911 has some advantages, we could only do it as part of a larger group. Otherwise, the added expense would be prohibitive. In fact, they (Michigan Bell) probably couldn't provide it."

Unlike the original 911, the enhanced utilizes city limits rather than telephone exchanges in routing calls.

That, boosters say, will make a difference in Southfield — where a portion of the city isn't served by 911 because it has a different exchange.

It's also expected to make a difference in Oakland Township and Rochester Hills, two communities bedeviled by misplaced calls.

Oakland Township's scattered residents receive service from one of three separate fire departments, depending upon whether they live nearer to Rochester Hills, Lake Orion or Bruce Township.

"IT (E-911) would work better than anything we've ever had," Clerk Caro-

lyn Phelps said.

Sprawling Rochester Hills, incorporated last year as a home rule city, suffers from a slight identity crisis. Many of its residents believe they live in the older city of Rochester.

"We still have problems with residents not knowing who to call," Spangler said.

E-911 is currently operating in 50 areas, including California's populous Orange County. Standard 911 service is available in 1,100 areas.

Currently, only Kalamazoo County features E-911 service in Michigan, although Bay and Berrien counties are also considering the service.

Despite the generally supportive air surrounding the Oakland County proposal, E-911 won't preclude some tough local decisions.

Because cost breakdowns involve multicompany telephone wiring zones, some communities may have to decide whether to pay more for the service if other nearby communities opt out of the program.

"If that's the case, we'll go back to those communities and ask them if they still want to participate," Phelps said. "The bottom line is that communities that don't pay won't receive the service."

BECAUSE E-911 will utilize one designated "public safety answering point" per community, some communities may decide whether to dispatch police and fire calls from a single location.

"Birmingham, for example, might make some decision on its dispatching," Phelps said. "Rochester Hills

(which has its own fire department but receives police service from the Oakland County Sheriff's Department) might make its fire dispatch the central answering point and make the sheriff's department a secondary answering point."

Smaller communities could drop dispatching altogether.

"That, of course, would depend on whether a larger community was willing to provide the service," Phelps said. "What we're saying is that each community could handle dispatching as it is now — only with E-911."

E-911 also features built-in obsolescence. A newer system that would provide caller's addresses as well as their telephone numbers is currently being developed.

Though the future system could be added to E-911, it would double to quadruple community's costs, depending upon estimates.

"That doesn't mean communities would go for updating the system, but the potential is there," Phelps said. "Once it's in we could always enhance it. We wouldn't have to tear anything down."

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This condition is usually the result of position or activity. Sitting with your neck twisted all day, such as typing, driving a tractor, painting, or working outside are examples of these activities. It can also come as the result of eye strain, sinusitis, or emotional tension.

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