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Hollister OK's 911 merger with Santa Cruz County

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Under pressure to cut spending, the city of Hollister on Monday approved a merger between local dispatch operations and Santa Cruz County's Regional 911 Center, a move disputed by the union representing local dispatchers.

If approved by San Benito County later this month, the move would shift local public safety and emergency communications, now based in Hollister, more than 40 miles west to a call center in the hills above Santa Cruz. Officials say doing so would eventually save \$250,000 annually, with Santa Cruz County officials pledging no changes for local callers.

"We have to look at ways we can save funds for the city," Hollister Mayor Pauline Valdivia said prior to Monday night's 4-1 vote. "Change is not easy. Change is hard."

Santa Cruz County's regional 911 center is itself the product of a 1996 merger and now dispatches for several agencies. It employs 35 dispatchers, a little more than half the number all agencies employed at the time of the 1996 merger.

With local governments facing immense revenue shortfalls, they have increasingly looked to cut spending through consolidation, and dispatch centers are a frequent target. Sonoma County, for example, is weighing a merger of several agencies' dispatch operations.

But Martha Booker, a chapter president with Service Employees International Union Local 521, said she is concerned that San Benito County, which has a population about one-fifth of neighboring Santa Cruz

County, is starting to outsource core operations.

A Silicon Valley expanded, San Benito County's population boomed during the 1980s and 1990s. But growth slammed to a halt during the past decade, according to latest U.S. Census figures. Unemployment hovers near 18 percent, and local governments say they need to cut costs.

"It's taking jobs out of the community, a community that is already suffering lack of employment and foreclosures," Booker said.

Booker also said the county could end up paying more to Santa Cruz County for 911 services down the road, and questioned why the city and San Benito County didn't pursue an outside feasibility study, instead relying on one prepared by Santa Cruz County's Regional 911 Center.

"If you're going to outsource a department and sacrifice 12 jobs, why not do a study that is not just from Santa Cruz, and see if we're actually going to save money?" Booker asked.

If approved, the merger would begin in October, with San Benito County's approximately dozen dispatchers expected to be offered jobs here. Not all are expected to accept them, however.

The merge also requires local dispatchers to be trained in San Benito County's geography and layout, and vice versa.

"They would just be integrated into our workforce," said Dennis Kidd, assistant general manager of Santa Cruz County's Regional 911 Center.

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San Benito County's infrastructure would stay in place, but calls would be rerouted to Santa Cruz. That requires some technical adjustments, but no major additions of buildings or equipment.

Furthermore, Valdivia said San Benito County's dispatch center would be preserved for use in case of emergencies.

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