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# Countywide **911** Dispatch



Government Effectiveness and Efficiency Series



## Efficiency in Emergency Response

Ashland County Communities  
Ashland County, Ohio

KENT STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
**THE CENTER**  
for Public Administration and Public Policy

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## **Disclaimer:**

This case study describes the “Countywide 911 Dispatch” collaboration for communities in and around Ashland County, Ohio. The story is told with the help of the researchers at the Center for Public Administration and Public Policy at Kent State University. We hope that by sharing experiences and lessons learned through this collaboration, we will help others start successful collaborations. The case study draws insights from community leaders, including Mayor Glenn Stewart (City of Ashland), Commissioner Scott Wiggam (Wayne County), and Commissioner Kim Edwards (Ashland County). The case study also benefits from insights offered by Mr. William Bragg (Ashland County) in 2010. The case study is written in the first person plural (“we”) tense -- as though the writers were present and involved in the collaboration -- to enhance readability and ease comprehension for its readers.

## **Just the Facts:**

When the National Emergency Number Association, NENA, handed down the Next Generation 911 standards for emergency call centers across the county, the response in our regional dispatch center in Ashland, Ohio was mixed. On one hand, we all knew that we had to find a way to track and respond to calls for help which came through new technology. With communication technology changing constantly, it was easy to see that when people reach out these days, they don't simply call – they also text, tweet, use Facebook and email. We needed to be prepared for contacts using all forms of media.

On the other hand, we all knew that the changes NENA called for -- text logs, advanced call logs, voice over internet provider connections (VoIP), and security processes for every communication -- were way beyond the limits of our current technology. Getting the technology to actually perform these tasks would be expensive, and our regional dispatch center didn't have the money available to just buy that equipment outright. With a NENA compliance deadline of 2014 ahead of us, we decided to get moving early, and evaluate our options. Since our dispatch center already operated across a number of communities including the City of Ashland, Ashland County, and a number of other communities in Ashland County, collaboration came to mind pretty quickly. With the economy the way it was back in 2009, however, we felt that we needed more than the tax dollars from our partner communities to buy all of the equipment we needed.

We heard of the Efficient Gov Now program through radio coverage. Run by the Fund for Our Economic Future (“the Fund”), the program offered a prize of \$100,000 each for governments that proposed collaborative ideas that won the most citizen votes in the contest operated by the Fund. We fit the contest criteria: our dispatch center served multiple communities, we were already thinking of collaboration, and we needed funding. William Bragg, IT manager for Ashland County Sheriff's office, stepped forward and offered to spearhead the project. He helped in drafting, submitting, and advocating for the project, and others supported him. In a way, we knew the project would probably require some changes to staffing and processes, but we also knew that we had no choice. We had to meet these mandates, and we had to do it in a little under 5 years.

In the end, we didn't win the EGN contest. We continued conversation about collaboration after the contest ended, as we knew that we would still have to comply with the new 911 standards. Unfortunately, however, as we learned more, it became apparent that the project would be more expensive than we had envisioned when we prepared the original EGN proposal. Indeed, estimated costs for complying with the new standards exceed \$1 million, so we began in late 2009 and 2010 to implement a piecemeal approach which involved the purchase of equipment on a step by step basis. Even so, compliance would be slow and difficult to achieve even with the collaboration we had established.

**“Political, fiscal, and structural issues must be dealt with before the new dispatch project moves forward.”**

**Mayor Glenn Stewart of the City of Ashland**

In early 2011, the City of Ashland – while continuing to participate in the joint dispatch center operated by Ashland County -- began to explore the possibility of creating a larger joint dispatch operation in cooperation with the City of Wooster and Wayne County. This new group of potential partners commissioned a feasibility study, and as of December 2011, the new partners are examining options for consolidation of dispatch services. As is the case with the Ashland County based operation, meeting the NG911 standards are included among the long-term goals of this project.

The one thing we are learning through this process is that you can't give up just because you can't move your project at the speed you wanted to go. We have learned other lessons as well. First, we found out that collaboration can be hard. Whenever you bring together people with different interests, you end up playing tug of war in one way or another. As observed by Mayor Glenn Stewart of the City of Ashland, “political, fiscal, and structural issues must be dealt with before the new dispatch project moves forward.” Without confronting these issues openly, success does not appear possible.

Second, there may be differences between what people want in conversation versus what they want in practice. These differences exist among leaders as well. As Wayne County Commissioner Scott Wiggam notes, “Leaders must make sure that they account for multiple end user perspectives, including elected officials charged with finding funding, and first responders charged with working within the final system. Leaders of dispatch collaborations must recognize potential differences of opinion between these two groups, and navigate them effectively.” This same kind of insight may apply to the public at large, which may want fast and reliable emergency services at minimum cost to taxpayers.

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**Scott Wiggam  
Wayne County Commissioner**

# Countywide 911 Dispatch

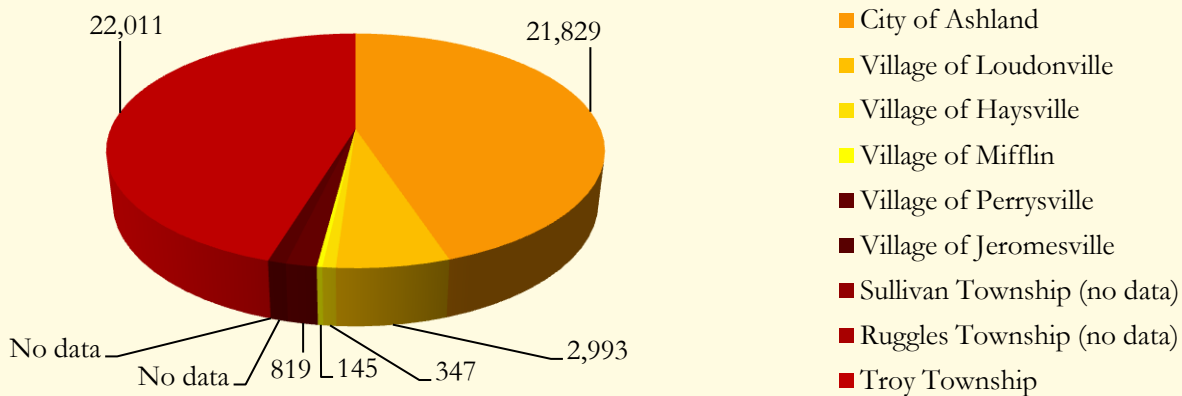
## The Problem

As a 911 dispatch center, we were already part of the National Emergency Number Association, or NENA. Over the years, we've seen some pretty significant changes handed down by NENA, including "Enhanced 911", or E-911, a policy change which required dispatch centers that had NENA certification to use cell phone or landline data to pinpoint a caller. Those changes required major shifts in the technology our dispatchers used, as well as how we carried out our training. We introduced E-911 telephone service, wireless 911 service, and a Computer Aided Dispatch system (CAD). It took a long time to implement these standards and, all the while, the communication technology people use in their daily lives continued to evolve.

It didn't really surprise us when NENA introduced a new set of regulations to meet our changing needs: our population was (and is) going through a fundamental change in the way we communicate. Tagged "Next Generation 911", or NG911 for short, these new standards were designed to enable us to respond to a range of different communications, including text messages, emails, and web-based calls. As with the E-911 changes, though, putting these requirements into action was not as simple as reading a handbook or taking a few classes. We required new technology to transmit these communications to the dispatchers, confirm information through new communications, and to record information and keep it secure. To meet these needs, we would have to buy equipment compatible with Voice Over Internet Providers (VoIP) and text message logging, as well as tracking systems. It would be expensive, which wasn't welcome news.

Now, being a combined dispatch center, we may have more resources than some other communities. Between Ashland County, the City of Ashland, and a number of other villages and townships, we have multiple communities that benefit from emergency services may also benefit by contributing support for them. But our tax dollars are limited, and since we were in the middle of a recession in 2009, spending was tighter than it had been in a long time. As you can see by the population breakdown below, our population is pretty small, so we don't have a lot of options for raising revenue.

**Figure 1: Ashland County (Population 53,139) and Partners**



## The Opportunity

The Efficient Gov Now (EGN) program is a contest which a Northeast Ohio philanthropic organization, the Fund for Our Economic Future (Fund), ran in 2009 and 2010. Created to encourage local government efficiency through collaboration, EGN invited local governments to write and submit proposals for projects that involve two or more local governments working together to improve or expand government programs and services. The Fund invited citizens from across Northeast Ohio to vote on their favorite project to select the three winners that would receive a grant to fund their collaborative projects. It was an appealing contest for a lot of reasons: it encouraged collaboration, rewarded good ideas and involved citizens in government choices. Some governments heard of the contest, and immediately set about creating an idea which involved collaboration. Other governments were facing problems which demanded a collaborative solution, and saw the contest as an opportunity to bring potential partners to the table.

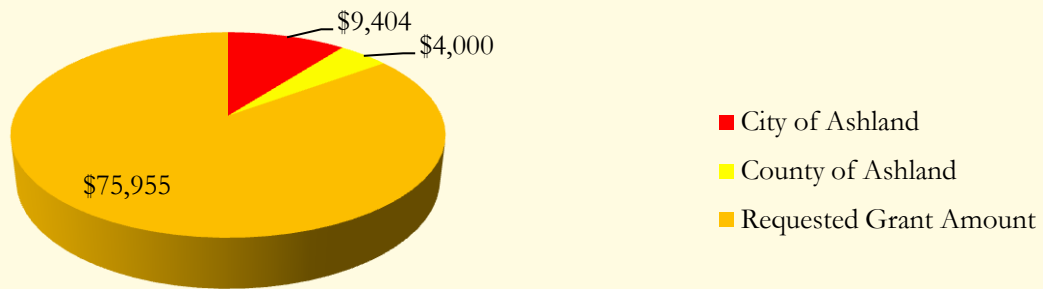
## The Plan

We knew we would have to work together to meet the new NENA standards, just like we did before when E-911 came. We also knew that we didn't have the money on hand to buy all of the equipment we needed at once. So when we heard about the EGN grant program, we were excited. It was a perfect fit: local governments in Northeast Ohio planning to collaborate on an important task. We did need a leader, though. So when Jeff Beebe, the head of IT of Ashland County, and Bill Bragg, head of IT for Ashland County Sherriff's department came forward to help, we were more than happy to have them play a leading role in moving the proposal forward.

## The Proposal

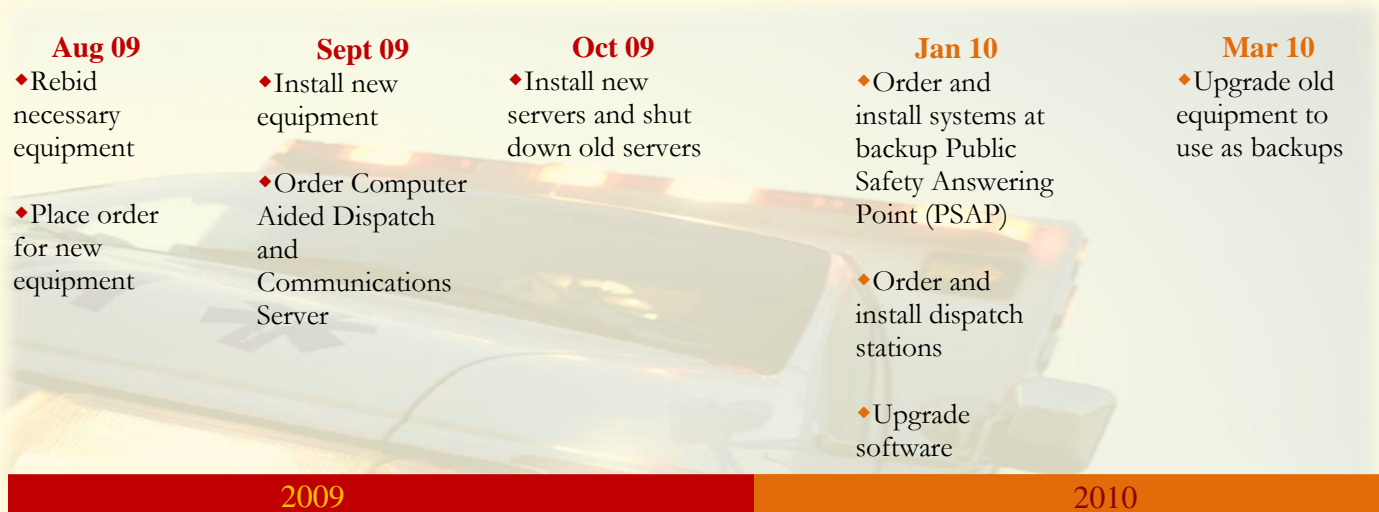
We worked to build on our original concept: a collaborative approach to meeting the NG 911 standards. With Mr. Bragg's and Mr. Beebe's leadership and the help of others, we submitted our "Ashland Countywide Regional Dispatch" proposal with high hopes. Our goal was to get almost \$80,000 in funding to help us buy the equipment we needed to be ready to meet the NENA standards and deliver the emergency protection our citizens deserve, with the remaining funds coming from the City of Ashland and the County of Ashland (described below).

**Figure 2: Revenue Sources (Total Revenue \$89,359)**



Now, our original project timeline was optimistic (described below), but so were we. We had worked together before, and we believed we could work together again to speed up our dispatch response times, improve our call records, make it easier for citizens to get emergency help, and speed up the arrival of our emergency services. If we played our cards right, we even saw a chance to cut down on the cost of our services for our citizens and businesses by reducing the burden that buying the new equipment would place on them.

**Figure 3: Proposed Project Timeline**



There were some serious challenges we had to face in the event the grant came through. First, we would have to deal with the elimination of a few staff positions. This made the entire proposal a hard sell to some of our employees. Second, there was little chance that we would be making new positions available after the collaboration moved forward. Third, most of our long-term cost savings would only come from the money saved from not paying for these positions in the future. In an economy starved for jobs, this wasn't welcome news.

## The Reality

In the end, we didn't win the EGN contest. This slowed the progress of our collaboration for a number of reasons. First, the equipment needed would be expensive, much more so than had been anticipated in the proposal, with the costs of NENA compliance being over \$1 million. Second, costs and the new equipment would likely to mean lost jobs and a difficult sell to local citizens. Third, coming up with the revenue needed to run a modern and NG 911 compliant operation would be difficult without restructuring the way member communities pay into the system, particularly in the rural areas. Fourth, funding from other sources is set to decrease, with dedicated state revenues for emergency dispatches set to sunset at the close of 2012. Although it is possible that these funds will be renewed, communities have been forced to explore alternative funding approaches which would be more sustainable.

## The Progress

We still need to meet the 2014 NENA compliance deadline. So in spite of losing EGN funding, we had to push on. Ashland County managed to get funds together to set up logging systems for text messages and VoIP messages, and managed to complete about 25% of the necessary infrastructure updates for NG911 compliance. We're also starting negotiations with a few different companies that sell CAD equipment. Discussions along these and other lines have continued into 2011.

In early 2011, the City of Ashland also began to explore the possibility of a joint dispatch with the City of Wooster and Wayne County. This new partnership commissioned a \$45,000 feasibility study with Cleveland State University (CSU), and by fall of 2011, they received word that – according to CSU -- a dispatch consolidation would be feasible. Indeed, the cost savings are likely to go up as the number of partners in the system expands. As a result, the new partners are examining options for consolidation of dispatch services across counties, and are engaging with a number of other potential partners to explore the possibility of a larger consolidated dispatch center. Meeting the NG911 standards are part of the long-term goals of this project as well.

**“People can get tied up in what ifs, and in emergency planning, there are a lot of what ifs. While you must be ready, you must find a happy medium between increasing efficiency and maintaining service, with the goal of making a system that is manageable and usable for agencies and residents.”**

**Commissioner Kim Edwards  
Ashland County**

Both the city and the county of Ashland are now exploring the various benefits and drawbacks to different approaches to meeting NG911 requirements separately. Concerns about cost, service, and speed remain clear themes in the ongoing discussions. In spite of these concerns, a decision must be reached. As Ashland County Commissioner Kim Edwards notes, “People can get tied up in what ifs, and in emergency planning, there are a lot of what ifs. While you must be ready, you must find a happy medium between increasing efficiency and maintaining service, with the goal of making a system that is manageable and usable for agencies and residents.”

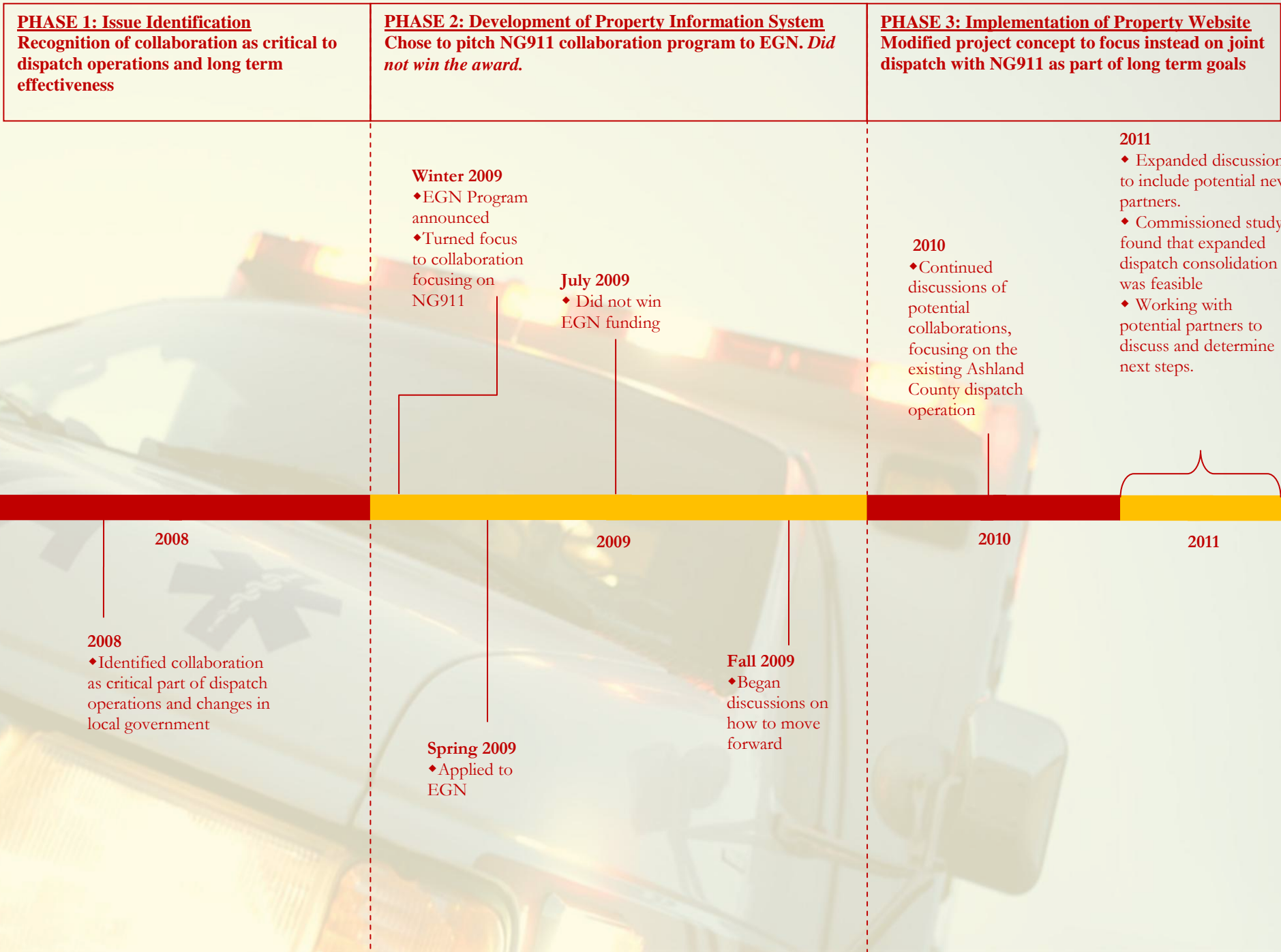
## The Outcomes

At this point, the outcomes of current discussions regarding joint dispatch center operations in Ashland and Wayne counties remain unclear. The Ashland County dispatch center continues to be operational and serves communities throughout Ashland County, including the City of Ashland. Efforts to address NG 911 compliance and other issues are almost certainly a point of discussion among current partners. At the same time, however, discussions regarding a new constellation of partners are also underway, and these discussions involve the City of Ashland, the City of Wooster, and Wayne County. If the new cross-county dispatch center idea moves forward, it could take on a number of forms, including: 1) the City of Ashland, City of Wooster, and Wayne County Sheriff's department, 2) These three core partners, plus other Wayne County Communities, or 3) these three core partners, Wayne County Communities, and Ashland County partners. According to the CSU study, in the first model, the City of Ashland would save \$122,000 in dispatch costs per year, the City of Wooster would save \$203,000 per year, and Wayne County would save \$200,000 per year. As the list of potential partners grows, the cost savings would increase. These cost savings are serving as a critical driver of the discussions relating to the project. As Mayor Glenn Stewart of the City of Ashland observes: “There is a very strong desire for collaboration, and it is driven by economics: we have to do more with less.” The problem in this context, of course, is how to be both effective and efficient.

**“There is a very strong desire for collaboration, and it is driven by economics: we have to do more with less”**

**Mayor Glenn Stewart of the  
City of Ashland**

**Figure 4: Complete Timeline of Dispatch Center**



## The Lessons

**“One of the basic lessons we learned is to bring all possible stakeholders into the conversation as early as possible, preferably prior to conducting a feasibility study.”**

**Scott Wiggam,  
Wayne County Commissioner**

The first thing we learned through this process is that you can't give up just because you can't move your project at the speed you wanted to go. While full compliance with NG911 standards among all of the involved communities has not yet been achieved, we are still working to meet them as part of our long-term goals.

Second, we found out that collaboration can be hard to accomplish. Whenever you bring together people with different interests, you must balance the needs of each partner to be successful. According to Wayne County Commissioner Scott Wiggam, “One of the basic lessons we learned is to bring all possible stakeholders into the conversation as early as possible, preferably prior to conducting a feasibility study.” As we moved through this project, we found that potential partners such as Wayne County and Ashland County should have been involved with the discussion from the outset.

Third, as we have worked on the issue of upgrading existing dispatch center operations, it has become apparent that change can be expensive, and this expense may be particularly difficult to manage in sparsely populated areas where significant revenue sources can be difficult to find.

And finally, there may be differences between what the public wants in conversation, versus what they want in practice. On one hand, they want better performance. On the other hand, citizens are also concerned about keeping tax burdens to a minimum – and this suggests limits on government spending.

In conclusion, we found that success depends upon a combination of persistence, inclusiveness, financial planning, and communication with the public. Without these critical elements, issues typical to any collaborative partnership become significant barriers which slow or halt progress.

# For More Information...

## PROJECT SPECIFIC CONTACTS

### **Glenn Stewart - Mayor of Ashland**

Phone: (419) 289-8622

Web: <http://www.ashland-ohio.com/>

### **Kim Edwards - Ashland County Commissioner**

Phone: (419) 282-4354

Web: <http://www.ashlandcounty.org>

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION CONTACTS

### **Center for Public Administration and Public Policy**

Phone: 330-672-7148

Web: <http://www.kent.edu/cpapp/collaboration/index.cfm>

### **The Civic Commons**

Phone: 800-530-8507

Web: <http://theciviccommons.com/>

### **Fund for Our Economic Future**

Phone: 216-456-9800

Web: <http://www.futurefundneo.org/>

### **Ohio Auditor of State**

Phone: 614-466-4514

Web: <http://www.auditor.state.oh.us/>