

CHP shutting down Truckee dispatch center

By Susan Wood

Come next May, the California Highway Patrol will have silenced its voice out of Truckee – moving the communications dispatch center to Chico.

The move is part of a five-year infrastructure plan by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to consolidate dispatch centers labeled PSAPs – Public Safety Answering Points.

CHP manages 25 dispatch centers throughout the state as an essential tool backing up its 109 offices with more than 11,000 employees.

The 40-year-old Truckee dispatch center – which handles South Shore 911 cellular calls – averages about 200 calls a day unless a major snowstorm prompts a surge in call activity. Landline calls are channeled through sheriff's and police departments.

In comparison, a large dispatch center such as Chico or Sacramento takes in about 3,000 calls a day, CHP Truckee Capt. Ryan Stonebraker told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Stonebraker assured the public the shutdown would be fairly seamless and explained how larger dispatch centers could manage the calls more efficiently based on their large staffing levels. If Chico becomes inundated with calls, some will be forwarded to Sacramento. In Northern California, other cities with dispatch centers include Eureka, Redding and Susanville.

“I think we'll have some growing pains. But with resiliency, redundancy and continuity in taking the calls, it will work

out. We've had these calls in Sacramento before. There are certain advantages to moving resources around," he said, adding that technical changes will need to be adjusted in the radio frequencies.

The captain, who runs CHP Truckee operations, pledged to have at least a few dispatchers from Chico and Sacramento familiarize themselves with the unique nature and terrain of the Lake Tahoe region.



CHP Capt. Ryan Stonebraker of the Truckee office is losing his dispatch center in 10 months. Photo/Provided

CHP dispatch took a critical hit a decade ago during the Angora Fire aftermath when South Shore witnesses – one with a distinct view from the Lake Tahoe Golf Course – called in to report the blaze early on and were told it was a prescribed burn that they shouldn't worry about.

At the time, it took South Lake Tahoe police dispatch Supervisor Leona Allen telling CHP Truckee dispatch it was not a controlled burn. The miscommunication led to a subsequent investigation about whether the devastating fire that consumed 254 homes could have been doused sooner. Results of the investigation have never gone public because the state labeled them a "personnel" matter.

Whatever the case, Stonebraker said dispatch is a very tough job and feels sympathy for the staff in Truckee being upended – especially since severe damage to its center and offices this winter sent staff to modular, portable facilities.

"I love my dispatchers. This is hard for me. I care about the center. I care about them," he said.

Truckee employs one dispatch supervisor and a dozen dispatchers who work varying shifts. They will be offered jobs at other dispatch locations, posts that are often readily available, according to Stonebraker.

Turnover in Truckee is high, with no staffers lasting longer than two years. To no surprise in a tourist town, housing is apparently as tough to deal with as the job, according to city and state officials.

CHP could not provide the amount in cost savings to close the facility, assuming there even is a savings.

Outgoing Truckee Town Manager Tony Lashbrook pointed out how the state is planning on investing about \$20 million in a new CHP building at a different site in town; it just won't have dispatch. Come 2019, the new offices will be built in the old U.S. Forest Service structure on Pioneer Trail.

The public resisted the new towers the CHP intended to erect on Highway 89 because they are in the scenic corridor of Interstate 80; however, towers already exist at that location.

"I wouldn't presume to second guess the CHP. Consolidation is the state of industry today. With technology, I'm not convinced it's super important where the dispatch center is located (in terms of call efficiency). But one factor in the proposed closure is the cost of housing, and the town didn't want the towers," Lashbrook summed up his assessment. One factor facilitated another.

The whole proposal was met with mixed reaction from external and internal forces.

"We're sad to see that happen. We like the dispatch here," CHP Lt. Cmdr. Terry Lowther of the Meyers office said.

CHP Chico also intends to rebuild with about a quarter of its 33,000 square-foot facility dedicated to dispatch.