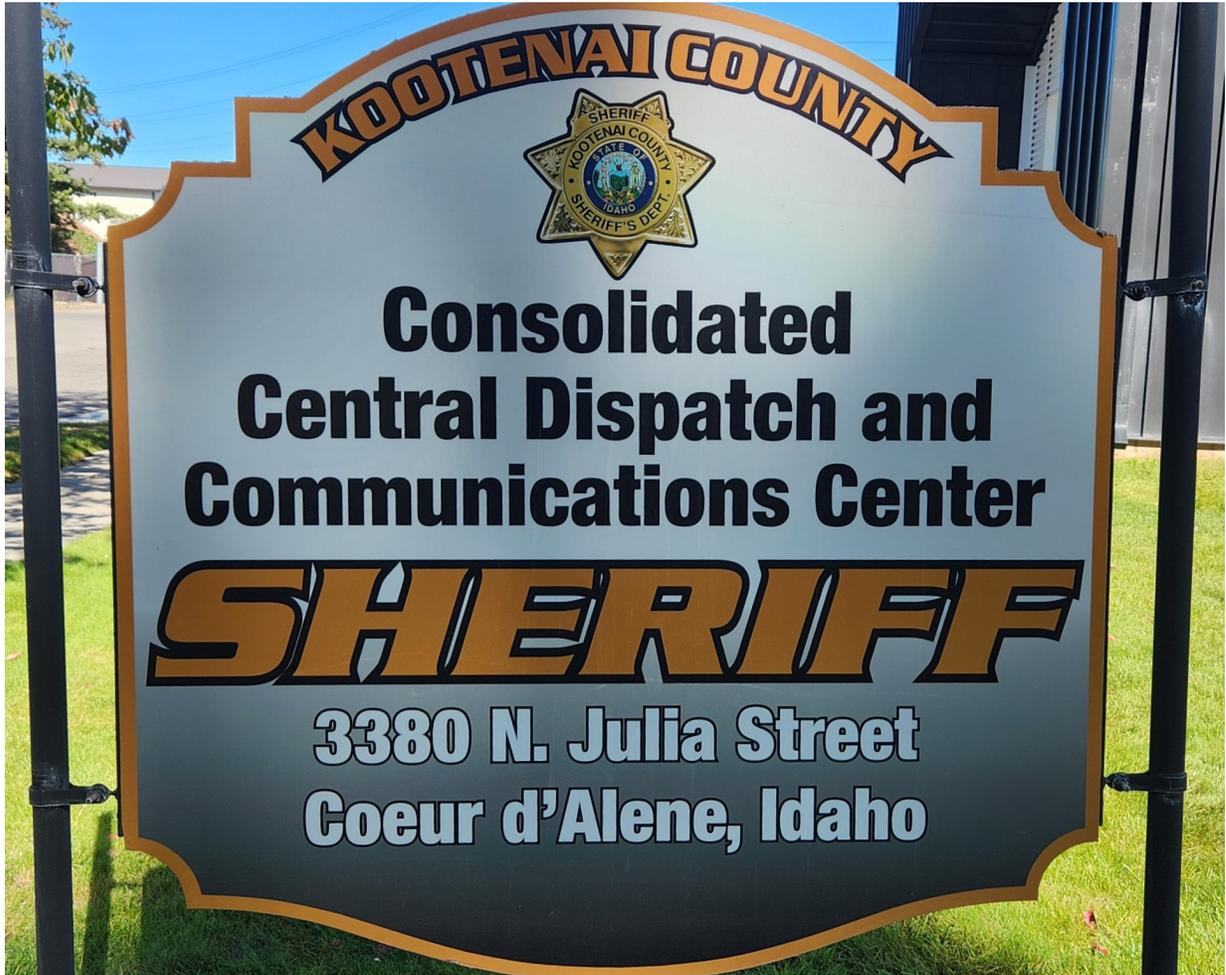


A Path Forward for Kootenai County 911

Prepared by: Lt. Jeff Howard, 911 Director
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Why This Decision Matters

When we talk about whether to remain in our current 911 center or build new, we're not simply talking about buildings and budgets. We're talking about the future of public safety in Kootenai County — about how well we can protect the people who trust us with their lives on their hardest days.

What We're Facing Today

Our current facility was built in 1992. It has served us well, but like many things that reach their thirties, the structure is showing its age: persistent plumbing issues, a roof that needs full replacement, and systems that simply weren't designed to keep pace with modern 911 operations. We've also seen the area around us change — including a fertilizer plant next door that brings constant odor and creates an environment that is not ideal for staff health, morale, or recruitment.

Dispatchers spend 12 hours a day in this building. They carry enormous emotional and cognitive load — they listen to the worst moments of people's lives so the right help gets where it needs to go. A clean, healthy, functional environment isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. The current neighborhood and aging building simply aren't meeting that need.

Lack of Space

The good news is that we've increased staffing. The hard part is that we no longer have room. We are out of console space, out of training space, and out of options inside this footprint. Even if we spend money to make repairs, we can't create more square footage. Every year we stay, staff will be more packed in and less supported.

Overcrowded Communications Center

As we continue to hire and progress toward full staffing, we anticipate up to seven dispatchers working in the communications room at the same time. While this staffing level is appropriate for our community's needs, our current physical layout cannot support that number of active call takers and radio operators without compromising operational performance.

The room was never designed to hold seven simultaneous positions. At that density, dispatchers are seated so closely together that caller audio, radio traffic, and supervisor instruction begin to overlap. This results in persistent sound interference and an environment where it becomes difficult to clearly hear emergency callers — particularly those who are whispering, panicked, injured, or otherwise struggling to communicate.

This overcrowding leads to predictable and unacceptable impacts:

- Background noise contaminates call audio
- Dispatchers raise their voices to be heard, escalating overall noise

- Critical information must be repeated, costing valuable seconds
- Phone and radio traffic bleed into one another, creating distraction
- Ability to concentrate decreases as noise levels rise

These conditions are not merely inconvenient — they directly affect our ability to gather accurate information and make timely, life-saving decisions. In 911 communications, missed or misunderstood details can have serious consequences for responders and the public.

Ironically, reaching full staffing — something we have worked hard to achieve — will actually make the current room less effective, not more. The limitation is not our people, but the space we are asking them to work in. Without appropriate separation, sound-dampening design, and room for supervisory oversight, we will struggle to provide the level of service the community expects and deserves.

The Technology Window

We are about to invest in Next Generation Core Services (NGCS) and new 911 equipment. These upgrades are essential — they give us the ability to handle future call and data volumes, and eventually text, photos, videos, and more. But here's the key point: installing NG911 in the current building and moving later means we would have to install everything twice — which is extremely expensive and disruptive.

In other words, waiting doesn't save money. It actually makes the entire project significantly more costly.

We are currently in talks with Motorola to replace our ageing 911 phone system. This will allow us to create a hub, in which 911 services can be delivered to other PSAPs throughout the state. By doing so, we will be building a robust, redundant network for not only Kootenai County, but North Idaho as a whole.

The cost of this system includes roughly \$900,000 of framework, transportation, and installation costs. If the system is installed and moved at a later date, we will have to cover a large portion of that \$900,000 again.

In regards to the cost and installation of NGCS, the current plan is to have grant funding cover these costs. However, if we move, the grant will not pay for any of the costs associated with that. We will essentially be giving away the grant opportunity if we move after installation of core services.

So What's the Alternative?

The County already owns land next to OEM and our EOC — the ideal location for a new facility. Co-locating with Emergency Management and the EOC gives us real, tangible

benefits during major incidents. When something big happens — a wildfire, a hazmat spill, a mass casualty event — being connected means faster information flow, stronger teamwork, and better outcomes for our community.

And the cost? Our initial estimate for building new is about \$7.6 million (as per estimates of the engineering company currently working on Spokane Regional Emergency Communication Center) — on the low side when compared to similar facilities regionally and nationally. When you consider that staying means paying to patch plumbing and roofing, renovate interior spaces, AND later install NG911 again after we are forced to move, new construction becomes the fiscally responsible choice.

A Place Worthy of the Work

Dispatchers are the unseen first responders. Their workspace shapes performance, retention, and well-being. Asking them to handle the stress of this job in a deteriorating building surrounded by unpleasant conditions is not the standard Kootenai County expects or deserves. A modern, purpose-built center communicates that we value the people who serve our community and the community itself.

The Bottom Line

Staying where we are isn't cheaper — it's simply delaying the inevitable while spending more along the way. We would still need a new building eventually, only after spending millions trying to make the old one work. New construction avoids duplicated technology costs, provides a 30–40 year future-proof solution, and gives our people the tools and support they need to serve the public at their best.

Recommendation

Building a new 911 center now is the best decision for public safety, financial stewardship, and community well-being.