

Rep. Kimbell called the meeting to order at 8:01am.

1. **Regional Dispatch.** Commissioner Michael Schirling gave an update on a proposal to regionalize the delivery of dispatch services in the state.
 - There are currently 4 ways that VT Emergency Responders access emergency communications:
 - i. 4 existing regional call centers
 - ii. 2 state-run call centers (down from 4 a couple years ago).
 - iii. Some EMR agencies provide their own communications services.
 - iv. Some EMR agencies contract with out of state providers.
 - This issue has been studied for decades and many reports have been published, all of which recommend some version of regionalization as the best balance between cost effectiveness and local control.
 - The two state dispatching centers' staffing levels are down 36%, the vacancy driven largely by the complexity of operations and growing workload. Each center has seen the highest rate of turnover in state government. In Westminster, the situation is dire enough that conversations have begun with Keen about taking their calls. The long-term viability of the system is in question.
 - Call volumes have been increasing across the state over the past couple years.
 - All public safety agency heads have been convened to discuss a transition to another model, a more regionalized approach emerging as the only viable option.
 - Several years ago, the general assembly provided authorizing legislation to enable intermunicipal agreements that support exactly the kind of regionalized partnership being proposed.
 - The current proposal is for to add 5 new regional dispatch centers in addition to the 4 existing. For 4 out of the proposed 5 (Chittenden, Washington, Newport, Windham) there has already been significant headway in setting up the needed infrastructure, and several could be operational tomorrow.
 - The barrier has been figuring out an equitable funding model. Some municipalities which currently receive dispatching services from the state for free have concerns about the transition.
 - In transitioning from the 6 existing centers (2 state + 4 regional) to the proposed 11, the system overall will add redundancy and resilience which are critical in crisis scenarios.
 - The proposal asks for \$11 million for at least one, maybe 2 years to fund the transition, in three veins:
 - i. Stand up new centers
 - ii. Support existing regional centers
 - iii. Support agencies that currently rely on state dispatch. Fund their first year of transition.
 - There is no proposed long-term funding mechanism to pay for emergency communications state-wide. Since many structures already exist at the local or

regional level, the task force responsible for crafting the proposal did not want to impose an overly prescriptive structure from the top down. Each region will determine the mechanism (intermunicipal agreement, contract-based service model) that best fits their situation.. Each local emergency services providing agency will have full license to choose where they get their services from.

- State support will be available to help municipalities plan for the transition, both funding through a grant program that will help to specify parameters for the shift, and technical assistance. The state can help with engineering, and plans to share assets including tower infrastructure, and radio frequencies with municipalities at no charge.
- It is anticipated that the full transition will take between 2 or 3 years.
- State-wide meetings have been happening weekly, now bi-weekly. Captain Lance Burnham (lance.burnham@vermont.gov) of the VT State Police is the person to contact for more information.

- *Q: Does this conversation about regional dispatch have broader implications about how we structure EMR services overall?*

Yes. Public Safety staffing has been dropping precipitously, in the post-pandemic, post George Floyd world. The VT State Police are down 53, and anticipate that they will be down 74 by the end of the year. Nearing crisis levels. Volunteer firefighters are down too. As rising costs in VT force folks to find second jobs, there is less time to volunteer. Burlington is an area of particular concern, as 60% of all the State's calls come from a 16 square mile area.

- *Q: Could state colleges offer training that could add to the workforce in this arena?*

Commissioner Schirling has recommended to the Criminal Justice Council that a degree program be developed that would streamline the career pathway into public safety, but to his knowledge there is nothing specific in the works regarding dispatch operators.

2. Updates on Omnibus Bills

- The House Committee on Agriculture & Forestry is look at language and taking testimony on the bill related to Accessory On-Farm Businesses, an offshoot from the Omnibus Bill.
- Reps. Sims and Kimbell recently convened a number of key recreation and trail stakeholders. They are excited to do some internal work on best practices and overall vision for the VT trail system, and not looking for action on Act 250 reform related to outdoor rec until at least next session.
- Rep. Sims shared that she had heard S.234 might be experiencing challenges in the Senate.
- Rep Rogers updated on the Tucking Weight Permit bill. The short form of the bill, dran from the Omnibus Bill, is currently in house transportation, and may be included in the miscellaneous transportation bill after crossover. She and others

have been working with VTrans and the VT DMV to address concerns around road maintenance budgets.

3. **Letter of support for Working Lands**

- VCRD will craft a letter of support, to be circulated among caucus members, for supporting a one-time allocation of \$15 million to the Working Lands Enterprise Fund, to capitalize on the current funding opportunity for this important and long-standing grant program. H. 697 - Use Value Appraisal Bill. A letter has been drafted from the caucus expressing support for the H.697, which was read for the group's consideration.

4. The group adjourned at 8:52am. **The next meeting will be Thursday, February 24th, at 8:00am.** Rep. Sims will be in touch with the link and an agenda next week.