

# Chautauqua County Consolidation of Emergency Dispatch Case Study

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**1. Municipal Characteristics**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Chautauqua County</b>	<b>Jamestown (C)</b>
2000 Population	139,750	31,730
Land Area (sq. mi.)	1062	9
Assessed Value Fully Taxable	\$4,422,258,812	\$192,017,701
Full Valuation Taxable Real Property	\$5,323,987,735	\$619,411,939
Total Tax Levy	\$53,369,107	\$11,594,160
Total Debt Outstanding	\$58,301,097	\$45,844,000
Total State Aid Revenue	\$231,905,089	\$73,996,740
State Aid	\$28,321,265	\$4,740,896
Debt Service	\$3,748,888	\$11,123,573
Total Expenditures	\$197,082,513	\$70,556,599
Expenditures:		
Police	\$22,995,597	\$6,853,643

## **2. Project Description & Impetus**

The consolidation of emergency dispatch services was one of a number of possible mergers of public services that began to be discussed in the early 1990's in Chautauqua County. Statements made by political and business leaders alike indicated they wanted to lower the tax rate and improve the business climate and, thus, improve the prospects for generating more jobs in the county. Further they recognized the possibilities that regional approaches would contribute to decreasing costs and increasing effectiveness by reducing redundancy and spreading tax burden over a larger number of taxable units.

This discussion resulted in a number of significant events that occurred in 1997. The centerpiece was a conference hosted by the former Lieutenant Governor, Stan Lundine, and Chautauqua Institution that took place in June. They had the enthusiastic support of the Chamber of Commerce, the Jamestown Area Manufacturers Association and the local newspaper for this four day conference convened to examine governmental regionalization and collaboration. In late May, just before this conference began, the County Legislature passed Resolution 109-97. It was titled "Planning for Partnerships between the City of Jamestown and Chautauqua County." This resolution authorized the creation of and participation in a "Shared Services Committee" that was to be comprised of political leadership from the city and county and private businesses in the Jamestown area.

This committee provided a formal structure to move forward the specific proposal to consolidate the emergency dispatch operations in Jamestown and the county. When he was asked why this specific proposal was brought forward, the then Chairperson of the County Legislature and a founding member of this committee described the attitude of the committee as one in which "if we are serious about shared services-let's get something done." Other possible mergers that were mentioned at the time included centralizing police services, creating a regional board of public utilities, consolidating property assessment services, engaging in regional school planning and coordination, and establishing regional road maintenance strategy.

## **3. Proposal(s) and Proposed Funding**

The proposal was to consolidate the emergency dispatch centers in the City of Jamestown and the County of Chautauqua. It was funded through a combination of city and county funds. For a three year period following the transfer of the city dispatchers to the county in 1999, the City agreed to pay the County, \$450,000 in three installments. At the end of this time period the county absorbed all the costs for dispatch services, including equipment upgrades and new software used for record-keeping. Personnel costs were funded through county taxes and equipment was funded through a monthly assessment on all phones (land lines and cell phones) registered in the county.

## **4. Legal Foundation and Legal Checklist**

According to both the County and City Attorney there were no legal barriers in New York State County, Municipal, or Taylor law to this consolidation.

## **5. Views on the Issue**

### **Pros – Those in Favor**

City council members, county legislature, and local businesses were in favor.

### Cons – Those Opposed

The first indication of opposition was the no vote to Resolution 251-98 by three county legislators. They were not vociferous, garnered no public notice through statements to the media, and did nothing to hinder the completion of the merger. Otherwise there was no formal public opposition presented by residents or affected professionals in the police or fire services.

### Local News Media Positions

Other than endorsing the concept of regional cooperation and consolidation as appropriate, the local newspaper in Jamestown took no editorial position on this issue.

## **6. Results (adopted, amended, rejected etc)**

The proposal as detailed by the “implementation team” that was created by County Resolution 38-98, was accepted and implemented.

## **7. Implementation**

Merging dispatch services was endorsed first because some initial ground work had already been accomplished. For example the minutes of a meeting held on June 22, 1994 record a summary of the technical questions that would be associated with communications’ consolidation between the Jamestown Police Department and the Sheriff’s Department.

In February, 1997 a member of the Jamestown City Council addressed a meeting of the County Legislature’s Judicial and Public Safety Committee. He urged the legislature to support the consolidation of dispatch services. In his presentation the council member provided one additional reason-from the city’s perspective-for this merger. His concern was one of fairness, i.e. city residents through their city taxes pay for the city’s dispatch office and city residents through their county taxes help to finance emergency dispatch for all other county residents. The City Council’s goal was to merge the service, have it apply to the city and neighboring village and town as well as the rest of the county, and have it all paid for through county taxes. This Council member indicated this would save the city \$370,000 in employee costs each year.

One year later on February 11, 1998 the County Legislature unanimously adopted Resolution 38-98. This established an implementation team “to ensure the most cost-effective and efficient delivery system for the consolidation of services.” The team was to be composed of city and county political, police and fire service leaders and required the County Sheriff to be its chairman. This team was directed to examine all personnel and technical issues and provide an implementation schedule, budget, and consolidation agreement on or before April 15, 1998.

On September 23, 1998 the County Legislature adopted Resolution 251-98 in which it accepted the report and recommendations of the Implementation Team, expressed its support for the proposed consolidation, indicated its support to commit the necessary funds in the 1999 budget, and required the city to begin impact negotiations with effected bargaining units that represented the city and county dispatchers. The City’s goal was to have their city employees become county employees.

Three issues: salary, seniority, and retirement benefits had to be agreed to in order to accomplish this goal. Salary quickly became a non-issue because the city employees were to be paid at the county rate.

This resulted in approximately a \$10,000 salary increase in annual income for each city dispatcher. The county employees insisted they have seniority for scheduling and layoffs over the city dispatchers, regardless of their years of service in this function in the City. Finally, the city was required to agree that the former city employees, upon their retirement, would receive medical benefits paid for by the city. This was a benefit they had previously enjoyed as a city employee.

The impact negotiations over these issues were concluded relatively quickly and amicably. At the same time the City and County negotiated a financial settlement. The City agreed to pay the County \$450,000 (approximately one year's budget for dispatch services in the city) in three installments over a three year period beginning with the signing of a formal agreement between the City and the County. The City Council authorized such an agreement in Resolution 9810A14 on October 13, 1998. With this resolution and the successful conclusion of the impact negotiations the County Legislature passed Resolution 52-99 on February 24, 1999. It authorized the County Executive to execute a municipal cooperation agreement with the city for the consolidation of emergency dispatch services in the county. This agreement was signed by the Mayor and the County Executive on March 5, 1999. As of this date the city dispatchers became county employees under the auspices of the County Sheriff. To complete the merger it was now necessary to move the new "county" dispatchers from their desks and equipment in the city police department to their new place in the Sheriff's Department in Mayville. What appeared to be a rather easy venture became the longest and most complicated part of the merger.

This phase of the consolidation continued to impact the two police departments. In addition people working in two new departments of city and county government became central to the success of the merger. They were those working in Information Technology (IT) who gave software, hardware, data management and other support to the essential record keeping and communication needs of the police departments.

The police departments were concerned that appropriate computer software and hardware and communication technology was in place to allow for communication that was reliable and instantaneous and in a common language, and further, that their prior records could be merged with future records to allow for the seamless data management of all law enforcement information in the city and in the county. The language was especially critical. The city police and the county sheriff's used a different nomenclature and numerical codes to identify characteristics of events and incidences. Compromises and adaptations were necessary to arrive at a single language so that dispatchers were communicating precisely and clearly to whatever police agency they were dispatching to the scene of an emergency.

The IT department transformed the nomenclature and the record of events to accessible data files using appropriate software. They also were responsible for selecting and running appropriate software to merge old files with the new records. This was problematic because old records were in a different nomenclature and thus had to be translated, accurately, into the newly adopted language. They also had to train the dispatchers and police to enter and to receive information from the new data management systems.

In addition to the above, new communication technology had to be acquired and put in place. This included new land line phone systems that allowed for the transfer of calls seeking routine information to the Jamestown Police Department. It also included cell towers and appropriate radios that allowed for instantaneous communication with police cars at any geographical location throughout the city and the county. In a county and city with high hills as a dominant geological feature, this is significant challenge.

In addition to these data management and communication issues two others also surfaced that produced some delay to the overall success of this project. The first of these has been identified by various informants (both within and outside the police departments) as “turf issues”. This is a label used to describe a “loss” of pre-existing functions and direct control over those functions.

### **8. Expectations vs. Implementation**

The proposal to consolidate the emergency dispatch centers in the City of Jamestown and the County was accomplished. The outcome of this merger was two-fold: 1) all of the dispatchers at work in the city became county employees and added to the county dispatchers’ already on staff and 2) the former city dispatchers would joined their county colleagues at a central dispatch center in the Sheriffs Department. The number of county emergency dispatchers doubled. The number of dispatchers on duty at the center would increase from three to five per shift (plus a supervisor) in order to give more comprehensive coverage to calls that would now originate in the Jamestown area as well as throughout all the other areas of Chautauqua County, except the City of Dunkirk and the Village of Fredonia. Neither of these jurisdictions decided to join the centralized dispatch and continue to provide their own service to the residents of these communities.

Various informants in the city and the county (Sheriff, retired deputy police chief) were asked about the results of the merger concerning the effectiveness of dispatch to emergency situations. Both indicate a positive result. Police and fire response times in the city and surrounding areas have decreased. Further the new dispatch center is better able to handle more emergency situations at one time and is able to better communicate with and to better coordinate the response of multiple first responders to large scale emergency events.

On its surface, this consolidation appears to be rather small in scale, especially when considered in the context of the multitude of activities and other services that local and county governments authorize. The amount of the budget impact was also relatively small. For example, before the city dispatchers became county employees, the budget for their services was about \$370,000 out of a total city budget of \$22,000,000. Similarly the county budgeted just over \$800,000 for dispatch services out of a total budget of over \$150,000,000. Nevertheless the process that was undertaken and the events that occurred in this situation provide useful information to those that would undertake similar or larger scale mergers.

### **9. Factors contributing to success/failure**

**Political Partisanship:** Partisan politics appeared to play no role in the events leading up to or in the wording of the various Resolutions authorizing the consolidation. The process began under a Republican administration in the County and the City and was concluded under Democrat administrations in both jurisdictions. When votes were held they were unanimous across party lines.

**Political Authority:** In this situation the political authorities that initiated and authorized the process through enabling legislation were the City Council and County Legislature. In its language, this legislation emphasized or inferred the “efficiencies”, i.e. the monetary savings, which would result from the merger. While this is an important consideration, it is not the only benefit that can result from such consolidations. Other possible benefits are improved public service, improved working conditions, faster response times, improved technology and equipment and improved management. It is suggested that for a given merger, all of the proposed benefits could be anticipated and described in the various

pieces of enabling legislation. This would help to focus upon future goals and help to generate and to sustain support for the merger.

Political Authority: As the one's who initiate, authorize, and ultimately provide the funding for a consolidation project, they could also take responsibility to see to its successful conclusion. (This assumes such a result is their intention at the outset.) One way to take such responsibility is to include oversight mechanisms into the language of the authorizing resolutions. This oversight could be in the form of requiring reports on progress at regular intervals in the process and/or reports to justify funding when yearly funding is budgeted. In this merger process, the County Legislature did require a report-but only one and at the outset of the process.

Political Authority: At the outset, before the enabling legislation is passed, this authority could anticipate all those in the various offices and departments whose cooperation and whose work was essential to the successful completion of a merger. Either informally or formally such authority, in this case legislators and council persons, could solicit the cooperation of those affected and attempt to alleviate any insecurities about jobs and functions that may arise.

The Process: Specific offices at various levels (Mayor, County Executive, department head, etc.) could be identified and assigned management responsibility for completing the project,

The Process: A mechanism should be created in which all of the specific issues involved in a consolidation can be identified, organized and recorded on an appropriate form such as a table or spreadsheet. In this way progress towards the solution of issues can be easily and readily assessed.

The Process: A division of labor should be established so that necessary tasks are worked on by those with the knowledge and skills to solve the issues that arise.

#### **10. The 10 Step Program**

The process that led to the eventual success of the contained all the elements of the "Ten Step Program."

#### **11. Technical Assistance**

Technical assistance was provided by those in the Informational Technology departments of the City and the County and by the software vender that provide the software that allowed for the merging of the police records in the two police department. Other than vendors who provided software and equipment under contract, no outside agency or individuals provided technical assistance.

#### **12. List of documents**

1. From the Chautauqua County Legislature: Resolution Numbers 109-97; 38-98; 251-98; and 52-99
2. From the Jamestown City Council: Resolution Numbers 9706B04 and 9810A14
3. "Agreement: Consolidation of Emergency Dispatch Services" signed March 5, 1999 by the Mayor and the County Executive
4. Minutes of Meeting held 6/12/94 titled "Communications Consolidation discussion (Technical Questions)"
5. Minutes of the Judicial and Public Safety Committee Meeting held February 4, 1997
6. Letter from Sheriff Gerace announcing the full consolidation dated December 22, 2003

7. Various newspaper articles from the Jamestown Post-Journal dated April 22, 1997; April 23, 1997;
8. February 4, 1998; February 10, 1998; May 16, 1998; March 20, 2002; February 10, 2003; January 13, 2004
9. "Emergency Communications Report: second draft." This report was prepared for the Chautauqua County Legislature (no date, but submitted in 1998): 22 pages plus 13 appendices.

**13. Additional comments/suggestions/helpful hints**

None were provided

**14. Contact Information**

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