

County officials: Emergency plans on target

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WISE Wise County officials say they've got a detailed emergency operations plan in place, and are working as fast as they can to get all telephone numbers matched to a correct physical address.

Appalachia volunteer firefighter Travis Anderson, who works as a career firefighter in Roanoke County, identified a number of concerns he has about Wise County's 911 system and emergency response plans during a recent county board of supervisors meeting.

County emergency management coordinator Jane Bennett, assistant county administrator Shannon Scott and geographic information officer Jessica Swinney responded to some of Anderson's points during a Friday interview at the county administrator's office in Wise.

911 system

Anderson pointed out to supervisors that the county's enhanced 911 system, also known as e-911, is not verified.

Our 911 system is way outdated, Anderson said, adding that the computer-aided dispatch system used in Wise central dispatch is not compatible with the county's computerized geographic information system, causing the wrong fire and police departments to be dispatched to emergencies.

Our dispatchers have dispatched Big Stone Gaps fire department into the valley area, Anderson said, adding that so much chatter is on local emergency radio channels that some calls go unanswered.

It's true that Wise County's e-911 system is not verified, Swinney said, but the county is very close, and factors outside of local control have held up the process. Just like most other Southwest Virginia counties, Wise County is in the process of verifying its 911 system, or linking each telephone number with a physical location.

The project has been underway for several years, Swinney said, and Wise County is now about 90 percent verified. The state requires 95 percent verification, she noted.

No 911 system can ever be 100 percent verified, Swinney pointed out, because every day, someone moves, builds a new home or relocates a mobile home.

Either way, if a 911 address in Wise County is verified, it will show up on a GIS map for dispatchers at Wise Central, Swinney added. The computer-aided dispatch system also indicates which police, fire and EMS district a call is coming from, she added.

Bennett and Swinney agreed that they're not aware of any dispatching problems relating to the computer-aided dispatch system, and noted that the system is definitely compatible with the county's GIS data.

Bennett noted that the county's dispatching technology isn't obsolete, either. Newer technology is available, but the county's system works just fine for now, she added. A new system could cost up to \$500,000, she noted.

Scott pointed out that Wise County was the first county in far Southwest Virginia to begin implementing a 911 system in the late 1980s, before such systems were mandated by the state. Because Wise County began setting up its system before 911 became mandatory, fewer grant funds were available to pay for the hardware and software it needed.

Swinney added that Wise County's verification process has been held up because it already had a 911 system in place before e-911 verification was required. Part of the verification process is getting incorrect addresses changed through the U.S. Postal Service. Because other counties are setting up their first 911 systems, their postal verifications are given priority, she noted.

Emergency planning

Anderson told supervisors that he was unaware of any countywide disaster plan, adding that a major disaster, like a flood, could totally cripple the county.

Wise County goes beyond what the state requires in emergency management, Bennett said, noting the county not only has an up-to-date emergency operations plan in place, but is in the process of updating it two years ahead of schedule.

The county has had an official emergency operations plan in place for many years, Bennett explained. Counties are required to update their plan every five years, and Wise County's was updated in 2004.

The plan is basically a how-to guide for any emergency situation, with leaders identified for everything from fire to rescue to media contact.

It covers everything from coal mining to flooding to terrorism to complete evacuation, Scott noted. It's got contact information for all the go-to folks in the county. It's all here.

Even though two years remain before the plan must be updated again, Bennett said she likes to look at the plan as a living document. She noted that she's working on plans to meet quarterly with all of the parties who would be involved in setting up an emergency command center in the event of a disaster, so the document can be as up-to-date as possible.

Both Scott and Bennett pointed out that Wise County doesn't just have a plan in place the plan was used, quite successfully, during the 2005 Big Stone Gap water crisis.

