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Work could start on new 9-1-1 dispatch center this fall

Agencies are working on an agreement that might consolidate city, county and fire department emergency calls into one system

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By ***Damian Mann***

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A 9-1-1 dispatch center that might handle all of Jackson County's emergency calls should start taking shape at the Medford airport by early October.

Adroit Construction Co. Inc. of Ashland will build the \$5 million, 15,000-square-foot building that will replace the communications center on the top floor of the Jackson County Courthouse. The county received four bids for the job.

"We need a facility that can survive an earthquake," said County Administrator Danny Jordan.

In 2007, a state study found the top floor of the old courthouse is vulnerable to collapse in an earthquake.

The county will receive about \$1 million in grants and will use a portion of \$8 million set aside for capital improvement projects to pay the remainder.

Southern Oregon Regional Communications will man the 9-1-1 center for the county, but the city of Medford is studying consolidating or locating its own emergency dispatch center in the building.

The new center will be built on Pech Road, just off Table Rock Road, and should be completed by summer 2009.

Jackson County commissioners Wednesday approved a series of agreements that needed to be signed before the project could begin.

They decided Ogden Roemer Wilkerson Architecture of Medford will provide additional design, engineering and contract management services for the construction phase at a cost of \$470,785.

Commissioners approved the selection of Adroit as the contractor after a review by Medford, SORC and the other agencies involved.

The county signed a 50-year lease with SORC for the building.

Cost of the project, including engineering, design and construction, will total up to \$6 million.

The building, designed by the county, Medford and other agencies, will be able to withstand an earthquake, will be fenced off and include other security features, and will house a backup computer system for the county.

Once the dispatch center is moved out of the courthouse building, the old rooms will be remodeled and the county's information technology department, which is spread out over many offices, will move into the space.

The possibility of consolidating all of Jackson County's 9-1-1 answering and dispatch services into one location also got a \$700,000 boost from Congress in July.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved a bill that includes money for the city of Medford to spend on software that would be needed to consolidate SORC and Rogue Valley Consolidated Communications.

SORC dispatches emergency calls for the Jackson County Sheriff's Department, many local fire districts and most local police departments, while the city-owned RVCMM dispatches for Medford and Ashland police and fire departments and the Medford airport fire department.

The new building has been designed to allow consolidation of all emergency dispatch operations under one roof, or to allow Medford to operate independently at the same location.

Police Chief Randy Schoen said he could see possible benefits to moving the city's dispatch center with its 26 employees to the new airport facility.

"It would be nice to have all the dispatchers in one room," he said.

But Schoen said he's going to reserve judgment until he sees the results of an independent study that should be completed by the end of September.

Matrix Consulting Group of Palo Alto, Calif. will determine whether there is a substantial cost benefit to consolidating the 9-1-1 services.

Schoen said that emergency service providers would have a more seamless communication system if the calls were routed from one facility.

Currently, the Medford Fire Department switches over to SORC once it goes outside city limits for a call.

Schoen said he and other officials worry that overall service may decline under a consolidated system within the city.

"We don't want to see the quality of service diminished," Schoen said.

He's also worried about how the consolidated service would be governed, as well as how decisions would be made regarding legal matters, staffing and how much Medford's share of the costs would be.

The city's 9-1-1 center costs \$2.6 million annually, but the sheriff's department spends about \$900,000 annually for its service, he said.

Schoen said he also can see the benefits of having two separate dispatch centers in case something happens to one of them.

Overall, he said the design of the new county dispatch center has been well thought out.

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