Chelsea Shows the Best Way to Prepare for the Worst

Massachusetts City Gives OK to Emergency Operations Center

“Risk assessment” is currently a buzz phrase in the public safety world. Each city and township faces a unique set of risk factors that must be considered. For coastal communities in the western states this might be the threat of a tsunami; for earthquake-prone areas, seismic considerations are a must, while many southern and mid-western states face the perennial danger of tornados and hurricanes. These days many public safety agencies recognize the importance of contingency planning and are investing in backup PSAPs (Public Safety Answering Points) and EOCs (Emergency Operations Centers). Such facilities can be activated in short order should the primary PSAP be knocked out of commission, or simply to provide extra capacity during a large-scale disaster.

Mass. Transit:
The City of Chelsea is a community of 40,000 on the Massachusetts coast. The city is comprised of residential, commercial, retail, warehouse, business, industrial and waterfront areas all squeezed into just 1.8 square miles. Chelsea is bisected by the Tobin Bridge, a major north-south route traveled daily by thousands of vehicles taking US Route 1.

Thanks to its location, bordering Boston on Boston harbor, Chelsea’s waterfront receives a large amount of ship-borne products including daily deliveries to the many petroleum storage farms located within the city limits. These tank farms provide a large percentage of the oil and petroleum products used in New England. Each year, approximately 4 million gallons of gasoline and other petroleum products are trucked through the streets of Chelsea to be delivered throughout New England.

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Planning for disaster:
With a large petrochemical storage and delivery system located in the heart of their city, the Chelsea Emergency Management Agency (EMA) under the command of Director Allan I. Alpert is well aware of the potential for calamity. “We have a lot of hazardous materials that travel through our city,” Alpert says. “The next city over is Everett, Massachusetts, which has the largest supply of liquefied natural gas in the northeast. On a week-to-ten day-basis, a tanker comes through Boston Harbor, through the City of Chelsea, and on to Everett.”

With volatile chemicals moving through a dense population center, the risk of fire or explosion is a constant concern—and with good reason. Twice in its history, the City of Chelsea has been ravaged by two major fires—the first in 1908, which burned down half the city, and again in 1973, when a fiery conflagration completely devastated 18 city blocks.

Backup PSAP:
When a city-owned property became vacant, Emergency Management Director Alpert recognized an ideal opportunity to significantly bolster the city’s emergency communications capability. The vacant building was the perfect home for an EOC (Emergency Operations Center) that could also function as a backup or supplementary dispatch center to cope with a large-scale emergency, an event, or a special operation.
Communicate with virtually all the public safety agencies, the system was designed that allows Chelsea to support facilities.

Radio communications are handled by four positions of Zetron's Model 4010 radio console. The EOC is also equipped with Zetron's Model 26 Fire Station Alerting System and a Model 3022 IRR (Instant Recall Recorder). The Model 26 in the EOC communicates via radio with Model 6 transponders located at area fire stations.

The design and installation of the communications equipment was carried out by ALL-COMM Technologies, Inc. under the direction of company President Paul Boudreau.

"The Zetron consoles allow the command center to communicate with every agency within a 50-mile radius," Boudreau says. "We chose the Zetron products because of their excellent quality, reliability and flexibility, as well as our extremely favorable track record with Zetron."

You help us and we'll help you:

Part of Chelsea's contingency plans includes calling in assistance from state and local communities in the event of a large-scale emergency. To aid this, a radio system was designed that allows Chelsea to communicate with virtually all the public safety agencies in the state.

Naturally, we have the fire and police channels," Alpert says, "but we also put in all of the emergency management channels from surrounding communities in case we need their assistance. Likewise, if something happened in one of the other communities—say if they lost their 9-1-1 center and didn't have a backup—we have all of their fire, police, public works and emergency management channels for them to use."

In addition to the City of Chelsea radio channels, the EOC also has a main fire channel, a tactical channel, an EMS channel and a mutual aid channel, as well as two UHF, two VHF, one 800 MHz, one low-band, and one aviation channel. This gives the Chelsea EOC the ability to talk to any community within a 50-mile radius of the city responding to fire and police calls. The EOC even has the ability to talk to MedFlight and local media helicopters.

A multi-use dispatch:

Although primarily designed for operation as a backup 9-1-1 PSAP, the Chelsea EOC's flexibility means it is more than just that.

"We use the EOC for training our new operators," Alpert adds. "We've also used it during special events. For example, every year we have a Latin American cultural festival that can draw as many as 5,000-8,000 people. In the past, we would deploy our mobile command vehicle as well as hiring back a couple of dispatchers and put them in our primary 9-1-1 center, which was already crowded. This year, we brought all the operations to the EOC."

The EOC also gets used during winter months to coordinate between snow plow drivers and Chelsea Police for the tagging and towing of cars during snow emergencies. Typically, this involves deploying two dispatchers, one for the police dispatch and one for the public works dispatch. Now when the snow plow needs assistance, the public works dispatcher can simply look over at the police dispatcher and ask for a patrol car to be sent out.

Meeting of the minds:

Director Alpert is rich in his praise both for the Zetron equipment and for ALL-COMM's expert installation.

"I've been the Emergency Management Director for 18 years," Alpert says, "but even with all my years of knowledge this project couldn't have been completed without the guidance and input of Paul Boudreau and the All-Comm staff. We took the best of everything that's out there and put this EOC together on a limited budget. I've dealt with many vendors and suppliers over the years, and very, very rarely could I say that I was 100% satisfied, but this was certainly the exception."

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