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Regional high's emergency radio problems cited

By Jean Laquidara Hill TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

HOLDEN— State and local police, fire personnel and other critical responders would not be able to communicate with some of their counterparts in other towns and agencies for the first 10 to 30 minutes of an emergency at or near Wachusett Regional High School.

The need for immediate communication among all area public safety agencies is one of the problems that regional response leaders addressed at a critical incident planning session Thursday at Wachusett Regional High School.

Local and state police, and other key emergency personnel from West Boylston and the five Wachusett Regional School District towns of Holden, Paxton, Princeton, Rutland and Sterling attended the session, offering specific resources and strategies for responding to an emergency.

The communication problem would be solved as soon as the Worcester County Sheriff Department's Mobile Command Unit arrives. The unit carries equipment that allows emergency personnel to communicate with each other.

But immediate communication would be necessary to alert all the necessary responders and to block traffic from the affected area, according to Holden Fire Chief John Chandler III and Holden Police Sgt. David A. Armstrong.

The problem is that the various agencies communicate on different radio frequencies, and only a few use the same frequencies, according to John R. Ruggiero, a radio maintenance technician for the state police in Holden.

Mr. Ruggiero said state police use a band that is incompatible with local police, and only some of the police and fire departments in area towns use compatible frequencies.

To further complicate the situation, said Mr. Ruggiero, there is inadequate room on existing frequencies within public safety bands to accommodate all area emergency agencies.

The solution, he said, is to purchase a patch to allow communications between radios using different frequencies,

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a solution similar to that provided by the Sheriff Department's Mobile Command Unit.

"It's a device that has each radio connected to it that makes each broadcast be broadcast to others (other radios)," Mr. Ruggiero said.

The obstacle to that solution, Mr. Ruggiero said, is the cost. Fire Chief Chandler said prices start at \$250 per unit.

Time is the other resource that is lacking among emergency personnel.

It takes hundreds of hours to plan all aspects of responding to a critical incident, such as a substance leaking from a truck near the school.

"We've got the knowledge to put this all together. It's just a matter of time," Chief Chandler said.

He agreed at the meeting to develop a chart of the bands and frequencies used by all emergency response agencies in the Wachusett towns, plus Worcester and West Boylston.

On a positive note, Chief Chandler said, the traffic diversion plan that state police Trooper Stephen T. Bedard presented at the meeting had every conceivable element in place, right down to the number of personnel and traffic cones that would be needed at each closed street if the stretch of Route 122A leading to and from Wachusett Regional High School needed to be closed.

The eight-page plan indicates which streets and intersections leading to Route 122A (Main Street in Holden) would need to be closed to prevent vehicles from getting into a critical emergency scene, and to allow emergency vehicles to get to the scene unhindered.

As part of that plan, Holden Department of Public Works employees would work with police to reroute traffic and free police for other duties, according to Sgt. Armstrong, who coordinated the planning session.

The next session will involve response vehicles, including a state police or medical transport helicopter, flying to the high school to test arrival and landing plans, Sgt. Armstrong said.



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