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## **Back-up Communications Center Improves Pasco's Emergency Preparedness Efforts**

**NEW PORT RICHEY, OCT. 15, 2008** – When Hurricane Charley raged ashore in Punta Gorda, Florida in August 2004, one of the casualties of the powerful storm was the Charlotte County Emergency Operations Center. Members of that EOC had to evacuate as the building began to crumble around them during the height of the storm.

For that reason, Pasco County and Sheriff's Office leaders decided to have a back-up plan if the worst-case scenario happened at the 911 Emergency Communications Center in New Port Richey, mere miles from the Gulf of Mexico. That back-up plan includes a newly-constructed backup communications center.

The **Pasco Board of County Commissioners** and the **Pasco Sheriff's Office** will display the new **911 Communications Back-up Center** located at the **Land O' Lakes Detention Center** at **2:30 p.m. on Wednesday, October 22, 2008**. The event is not open to the public, but the media is welcome to attend.

Completion of the backup center was a joint effort by Pasco County and the Sheriff's Office. In 2006, about a year after the Pasco Sheriff's Office co-located with the 911 Emergency Communications Center, it was determined that there was not a viable back-up site for this mission critical function. Sheriff's Office and Fire-Rescue personnel set out to find a suitable site. While completing plans for the newly remodeled Juvenile Assessment Center at the Land O' Lakes Detention Center, Sheriff's Office jail administrators agreed to downsize the JAC to make room for a communications backup center.

The completion of the back-up center was the first goal Elmer Holt, 911-Operations Manager, was directed with completing when he was hired in November 2007.

“In the case of man made or natural disasters that may disrupt the operations of the 911 Center it is imperative that we have the technology in place to provide a seamless transition to the back-up site in order to avoid any loss of 911 calls,” Holt said. “We are prepared to provide the same level of professional service to the community even with the loss of our primary site.”

The County’s Information Technology Unit supplied the staff to furnish and connect the computers. Interior construction was completed using inmate labor. Networking and installation of computers was done jointly by Pasco County and Pasco Sheriff’s Office IT staffs. Sheriff’s office and Pasco Fire-Rescue personnel put the finishing touches on the center to ensure that their particular emergency communication needs were met. Compared to the costs of building an entirely new center, considerable tax dollars were saved by using the available space at the Land O’ Lakes Detention Center. Inmate labor saved another \$25,000 in construction costs. The main cost of the backup center was the \$160,000 needed to refurbish the specialized computer equipment from the old Sheriff’s Office comm center in Dade City that routes incoming 911 calls. The cost of new equipment would have been about \$1 million. In the end, the total cost of the backup center came to about \$250,000, a fraction of what a new center would cost to be built from the ground up and furnished with new equipment. The project was funded with the 911 fees that most telephone users pay as part of their service contract.

Elmer Holt explains that the Backup Center is just the first in many improvements planned for the county’s emergency communication capabilities. His unit has been awarded a grant for more than \$819,000 to upgrade its current 10-year-old computer system that routes incoming 911 calls. The goal is to purchase an IP-enabled Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG9-1-1) system able to adapt rapidly to new technology and support new devices. Holt is also pursuing an additional grant of \$900,000 that would provide enough funds to complement this state-of-the-art equipment by developing a 911 IP network in Pasco County. The highest priority will be to provide a system that allows the hearing impaired to access 911 systems via text messaging, no doubt an ADA requirement in the near future.

### **Questions about the new Backup Center**

**1. Will a demonstration of actual incoming 911 calls be handled at the backup center for the media event?** No. If the computer system is activated, it will start routing actual emergency calls to the Backup center, which would not be a good environment at the time (during the media event) to handle those calls.

**2. Has the Backup center been tested with actual incoming 911 calls?** Yes. In August, the Backup Center went live twice for two hours at a time when actual emergency calls were routed there and dispatched. It was a successful test with staff involved just as it would be if the Backup Center was needed on a full-time basis.

**3. What other functions will the Backup Center fulfill?** The Backup Center can be used anytime that a problem occurs with the county's regular, full-time 911 operation. This can include technological issues with computers and other equipment, problems with the actual building in New Port Richey, or with the extreme case of a natural or man-made disaster. In addition, the Backup Center can be used for the needs of the four city police and fire departments if there is a problem with their emergency communications.

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