

Answering the call for shared services

IXP handles emergency dispatches for efficiency-minded towns

BY BETH FITZGERALD

NEW JERSEY MUNICIPALITIES looking to share services in a bid to cut costs have made 911 dispatch centers — major expenses in technology and staff — an area of focus, and Cranbury-based **iXP Corp.** hopes to do more business with efficiency-minded local governments across New Jersey.

IXP, a supplier of 911 technology and emergency communications consulting services, already counts New York's police department and Princeton University among its clients, and CEO **William Metro** said he expects New Jersey to be a growth area for the company.

The sharing strategy already is taking hold here, he said. Somerset County, for example, operates a communications center in Somerville, where 45 employees handle all or portions of police, fire and 911 dispatch for towns across the county, according to **William J. Stahl**, director of the Somerset County Department of Public Health and Safety. Bernards Township estimates saving \$262,274 this year and \$307,100 in 2013 from its move into the county 911 system, according to Police Chief **Brian Bobowicz**.

Greg Fehrenback, coordinator for local municipal cooperation at the New Jersey League of Municipalities, said the

2 percent property tax cap "has been motivating municipalities to examine ways to reduce the cost of operations." Some are looking at keeping their own 911 dispatch staff while sharing radio technology, while others are merging their 911 systems, or joining county-wide services.

"Cooperation right now is the order of the day, because of the cap," Fehrenback said. Very small municipalities can achieve economies of scale by consolidating 911 service with other small towns, but "once you get to a population of 50,000 or 60,000, there is really not much to be gained, because density tends to generate more activity."

Metro said iXP is talking to several New Jersey towns, and hopes to reach a deal to take over 911 operations in the next six months.

"Municipalities have to provide services with decreasing budgets — they have to do more with less," Metro said. "A typical town with 30,000 to 50,000 people will have a dispatch center, four to eight dispatchers and technology that costs a half million to \$1 million," but a group of towns pooling their 911 services could see savings between 15 percent and 25 percent, he said.

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Metro says iXP has nearly tripled in size in the past three years as the idea of shared services gains a stronger foothold.

size, to 120 employees, in the past three years, and said the privately held company has annual revenues of between \$15 million and \$20 million. He expects to add between 20 and 30 employees in the next year as the company markets its security technology solutions in New Jersey and beyond. The company has clients in 25 states.

IXP, Metro said, can provide simple consulting and technology support to

911 centers staffed by government employees, or it can provide a completely outsourced solution, like it does in Sandy Springs, Ga., where the company also answers the phones when emergency calls are placed. IXP now has 65 employees in the 911 communication center in the new Atlanta suburb, which since its 2005 incorporation has become famous for outsourcing municipal services to the private sector.

Metro brings a unique perspective to the idea of municipal sharing: The Princeton Township resident served as a citizen volunteer on the commission that recommended the merger of Princeton borough and township. Voters in the two Princetons, which had been sharing some municipal services for years, approved the merger last November; Metro chaired the subcommittee that studied how to consolidate the two police departments. "It was a fantastic experience and I enjoyed every minute of it," he said. "It showed democracy at work, and I think we made the right decision for full consolidation."

Besides working with cities and towns on 911 service, iXP provides security to private companies and colleges. Eighteen iXP employees operate and manage the Baltimore-based security operations center for Constellation, a unit of energy utility **Exelon**; and the company provides campus security technology to more than 22 colleges, including five of the eight Ivy League schools.

"We help them put a plan together to provide better security on campus," Metro said. Colleges typically have a system of emergency phones scattered throughout the campus; iXP is now preparing a new "virtual blue light" allowing students to alert campus security through an emergency button on their smartphones.

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William Metro calls New Jersey a growth area, as more towns look to share services like 911 communications. He's played a key role in the municipal merger of the Princetons.