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RE: Public Comment Regarding Your Consideration of a Public Safety Building

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for taking on this difficult and complex task with a very short timeline. Serving the facility needs of what could be considered five distinct functional departments ¹requires an extraordinary amount of historical, legal, and operational knowledge, as well as a more than surface knowledge of the current trends and difficulties impacting the future of these services. Thank you for your willingness to take this project on as it will surely impact the majority of the services provided to the residents of this Town into the foreseeable future.

I would like to take a moment to describe the experiences that form the basis of my opinions. I am a resident of Ridgefield, and, for the last 33 years, have run a small law firm that represents public safety officers employed by a variety of police, fire, EMS departments, as well as regional and local dispatch units, and state trooper specialty units. I've also had the privilege of partnering with and employing retired fire officers, police officers, and troopers. It has given me an inside look at how paid and volunteer departments administer themselves and interact with the public.

1. Support for Portions of the Proposed Public Safety Facility

¹ In this letter I include Fire Suppression, Fire Marshal, EMS/ Ambulance, Police Department, and Dispatch as separate Public Safety functions/departments because each is distinct statutorily and administratively. Fire Suppression could also logically be further divided into Volunteer and Career components.

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A. The Firehouse and Police Station No Longer Meet the Needs of Ridgefield Residents

I strongly support the need for modernized facilities for the public safety departments that serve the residents of Ridgefield.

The Catoonah St. Firehouse is substantially past its useful life and is not configured for the number of EMS service calls it receives or the attendant training, billing, storage of medical equipment and supplies that are required to efficiently service Ridgefield's aging population. Further, it is deficient in meeting the health and safety needs of the firefighters, particularly as regionalized response to hazardous materials and terrorism becomes part of its required capabilities. Without doubt, firefighters benefit when post-traumatic stress and exposure to cancer causing materials are minimized.²

Similarly, the Police Department facility is outdated and lacks the office space necessary to address the increase in financial crimes against Ridgefield's aging population and the number of calls with a mental health component, among other challenges. The women's locker room at the PD is an embarrassment and calls into question the Town's sincerity in recruiting and retaining women officers.

The need for improvements in technology, privacy protections, as well as compliance with State and Federal mandates and best practices is equally obvious throughout the various functions. The fact that Ridgefield FD was one of the few departments that did not participate in the 2025 CT DEMHS Fire Services Study points to an overloaded administration or poor record keeping.

2. Suggested Modifications to Portions of the Proposed Public Safety Facility

A. Ridgefield Should Participate in Cost Saving Regionalization of Dispatch Function

Although the State has encouraged regionalization of functions to reduce costs, successful consolidation has to date been limited to the Dispatch function.

Ridgefield should consider participating in a regional dispatch center—often referred to as **Regional Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs)**—that consolidate 911 services for multiple municipalities. These centers are public or non-profit entities, not private contractors.

The following list summarizes major regional dispatch centers as of early 2026:³

- Quinebaug Valley: this center provides 911 dispatch for 17 towns in Northeastern Connecticut. Fire & EMS.
- Tolland County serves Fire & EMS: 16 towns.

² Focusing on these pro-active strategies also reduces the costs associated with sick leave, workers compensation claims, and early retirement due to disability.

³ Information drawn from CT DESPP website.

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- Northwest CT Communications in Waterbury, this center is one of the state's largest and most comprehensive regional hubs. Fire & EMS: Dispatches for 11 Fire Departments and 13 EMS Agencies and Waterbury PD.
- Fairfield County Regional Dispatch This center coordinates services for Westport, Fairfield, Easton. Fire & EMS, Police.
- Southwest Regional Dispatch This center coordinates services for Monroe, Trumbull and several key Fairfield County municipalities. Fire & EMS.
- Litchfield County-Though sometimes overlapping with NWCT for specific services, it serves a distinct set of Litchfield County towns.
- Valley Shore Emergency Communications (VSEC) Located at State Police Troop F in Westbrook, it serves Shoreline and lower Connecticut River Valley towns.

The State provides operational subsidies to Regional PSAPs (3+ towns). Currently, five regional PSAPs receive this funding. There are also annual subsidies for smaller groups and EMS only dispatch.

Ridgefield should consider joining an established dispatch system. Dan Hunsberger, a retired Stamford Fire Captain and manager of Stamford Dispatch function, is currently the Monroe town representative on the Southwest Regional Board, and is willing to discuss the pros and cons of utilizing a regional dispatch system. Ridgefield currently employs 8 full time civilian dispatchers and 2 fulltime and 4 part-time firefighter dispatchers. The 2025 Annual Budget shows a cost of over \$880,000 for the civilian component of those personnel. Integrating with a regional system would reduce that cost. Additionally, whatever facility is built would have a smaller footprint.

B. Ridgefield Should Consider using a Private Commercial Ambulance Service

In Connecticut, ambulance services are a mix of municipal, volunteer, non-profit, and private commercial providers. EMS is not a statutorily required municipal function. There are over 150 EMS departments; 75 are volunteer EMS, 58 are a function of volunteer Fire Departments, and the remainder are functions of municipal fire departments, hospitals, and commercial services. Further, many departments contract for paramedic services with hospitals for Advanced Life Support Services.

Unlike 911 dispatch, which is strictly public, many towns contract their EMS to private commercial companies. According to the CT Department of Public Health, towns designate a Primary Service Area Responder (PSAR) to answer 911 medical calls. The most common private contractors are Nuvance Health, American Medical Response (AMR), Hunter's Ambulance (owned by Hartford HealthCare), and American Ambulance Service.

As an example, Nuvance Health Ambulance provides 24/7 emergency medical services and paramedic resources primarily in Western Connecticut and parts of New York, including Danbury and surrounding towns. Key areas served include Norwalk, New Canaan, Weston, Wilton, New Fairfield.

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Demand for medical services continues to rise, with Ridgefield reporting that over **80% of calls are EMS-related**. This shift requires more expensive specialized training and equipment.

Ridgefield could avoid substantial building costs, as well as equipment, vehicles and training expenses by reducing its commitment to providing ambulance services with municipal employees, equipment and facilities.

C. Combining the Operations of the Public Safety Departments is Unwise

As I'm sure you already know, of the 169 municipal entities in Connecticut, **only one**, Farmington, has an integrated public safety function, and only Hartford has a common public safety building. Although some towns, including Wilton and Weston, have municipal campuses, in general services are provided by separate departments. To put some dimension on that statement, the State identifies;

- 173 police departments comprised of 95 municipal departments and 78 municipalities that either utilize Resident State Trooper programs or are patrolled by troopers directly.
- Approximately 300 Fire Departments comprised of 88 municipalities with exclusively volunteer departments, 15 career departments, and 66 municipalities with a mixture of paid and volunteer fire fighters. There are more fire departments than municipalities because many towns have multiple fire departments.

To repeat, **169 municipal entities have almost 500 police and fire departments, of which only 2 have successfully integrated the operations and/or facilities of their public safety functions**. In my opinion, trying to be a thought leader in this arena is unwise. These functions have different chains of command, different regulatory environments, different sources of recruits, different retention challenges, and the people who thrive in Fire Departments are very different than those who excel in policing. These challenges lead to unnecessary conflict.

Ultimately, your committee must look forward to find the most efficient and cost effective way to provide public safety services to the residents of Ridgefield. I urge you to consider what policing and fire services will look like in the future and not simply replicate what we've done in the past. Please call me if I can be of assistance.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this input.

Best wishes,

Lisa Maurer

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