

## County awards 911 call handling to Sudbury-based Northern911

By Tom Claridge

Starting next month, and for at least the next three years, 911 calls by Dufferin residents that are currently handled by the Orangeville Police Service (OPS) will be answered by Northern911, a private firm based in Sudbury.

Transfer of the service was approved by Dufferin County Council last Thursday on receiving a staff report indicating that the Northern911 bid in response to a request for proposals, involving a per-capita cost of 48 cents, was preferable to one from the Owen Sound Police Service that had a per-capita cost of 56 cents.

Council was advised that, based on a current population of 61,670, the annual cost to the County will start at \$29,601.60 ? down more than \$70,000 from the current \$100,000 paid the OPS. If the three-year contract is extended to 2020 and the population by then is 64,610, the cost will reach \$31,012.60.

The only other bid received ? from the OPS ? was disqualified because of its failure to quote a per-capita charge, its submission on costs saying only: ?As the incumbent service provider to the County of Dufferin and in recognition of the net benefit to the citizens, the Orangeville Police Service will match the price of the lowest bidder to maintain our relationship.?

An accompanying letter from Police Chief Wayne Kalinsky noted that the OPS has been providing the 911 service to Dufferin for more than 20 years.

?We believe a local service provides extra value to the citizens through a more efficient delivery of emergency services. Local communicators not only receive the initial 911 call but in many cases also dispatch police and fire response, minimizing wasted time or miscommunication between agencies,? Chief Kalinsky said, adding that if no other agency submitted a proposal ?we will match the OPS advertised annual rate of \$.0561 per capita.?

The OPS submission was accompanied by letters of support from the chief administrative officers of Orangeville, Shelburne, Mono and Amaranth. In her letter, Amaranth CAO Susan Stone said the OPS dispatchers ?are trained emergency call takers who form the vital link between callers in distress and emergency response teams. They have always been very efficient, which is important in emergencies, given [that] seconds can make the difference between life and death.?

The proposed transfer was opposed by Orangeville Mayor Jeremy Williams, who also chairs the Orangeville Police Services Board. Although acknowledging that the OPS response to the request for proposals (RFP) was incomplete, he suggested Council could opt not to accept any proposal and issue a new RFP ? a suggestion others saw as risking litigation.

In his report to Council recommending acceptance of the Northern911 bid, Keith Palmer, Council's Director of Community Services said the RFP ?detailed the technical requirements and professional expectations that the County deemed to be crucial in the delivery of this essential emergency service.? It also ?requested costing based on a per capita rate.?

Mr. Palmer said a review of the two bids that included per capita rates ?demonstrated Northern911 better met the criteria. Their proposal included an innovative enhancement of 911 services that was comprised of access to an information and data portal for reporting purposes as well as Voice-over Internet Protocol services (VoIP) and 911 text messaging capabilities. Northern911 has the ability to provide services in more than 170 languages and in 2014 they answered more than 400,000 emergency calls for their various clients.?

The firm said its staff is certified by the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials and the average tenure of its employees is 13 years, with 90 per cent of its 911 call-takers having more than two years' experience.

As well, the firm has developed a Continuity of Operations Plan it says will ensure that they can provide uninterrupted service

during a disaster.

A chart produced by the County showing how the 911 system operates indicates that the only function served by the Sudbury-based call-takers is to take the call and ask the caller what emergency service is required. The calls are then transferred to the appropriate remote agency dispatch. Calls from areas served by Dufferin OPP detachment go to the force's Orillia headquarters. Calls for the Orangeville and Shelburne police and fire services will continue to flow through the OPS.

Northern911's website, [www.northern911.com](http://www.northern911.com), says the firm is a subsidiary of Northern Communication Services Inc. The company was started in 1954 in Sudbury, Ontario as a message centre using manual 'cord-boards' to handle each call. Over time the business has grown through acquisitions and new ventures into one of Canada's finest businesses with branches in Sudbury, North Bay, Timmins and Sault Ste. Marie. The company is owned 100% privately by a group of individuals residing in Northern Ontario. Within this group, there is significant financial strength and an intangible sense of pride of ownership.

The firm says it currently provides E911 wire line and VoIP 911 dispatch services across North America. Northern911 was the first and is now the largest VoIP 911 Call Routing and Emergency Dispatch service in Canada.

Asked Tuesday whether he could provide an indication of the extent to which Northern911 is handling other calls from Southern Ontario, Dave Adams, the firm's special projects coordinator replied that he couldn't name any counties, 'but you're not the first. We're in many counties.'