

# Still not convinced we need it? Let's bring it down to brass tacks

■ BY MARCY SHORTUSE

To be frank, you might think that this emergency communications project sounds outlandish and created to cater to a community with too many monied people who feel they should have preferential treatment in the event of a disaster. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you are confused as to why this is necessary, take a look at a few key factors first.

– **We are a long way from our county's home base.** It isn't a mystery to many of us that we don't get the same attention or the same funding as other places in unincorporated Lee County, which we often grit our teeth over but deal with because in remaining unincorporated we have a certain amount of autonomy. Lee County loves nothing more than for us to deal with our own problems, so they don't have to worry about getting anyone angry at them. By using private funding (or funding from other grants or resources) to pay for the system, we have complete control over it and don't have to worry about bureaucracy getting in the way.

– **Again, knowing that we are so far away from Lee County's base of operations, we are much more familiar with the nooks and crannies of the island.** It is much easier for one of our firefighters or sheriff's deputies to know where The Range Light or Pilot Street is, in the event that is the only locator given for an emergen-

cy. We have had much evidence of Lee County 911 dispatchers not only not knowing where The Range Light is – or what it is – but also that some of them don't even know where Boca Grande is.

– **During a crisis it is more clear to our island's first responders where to find immediate help.** Anything from street clearing to additional on-island manpower, finding boats for a search party or just finding bags of ice nearby would be quicker. And if the first responders don't know where to find an island resource, they probably know whom to ask to find it.

– **Everything about this system saves time.** Saving time saves lives in disaster situations. Our first responders know this island inside and out, while very few first responders based out of mainland Lee County do. And while Charlotte County is much closer, until we can repair our relationship and communication with them it is a moot point.

Last year a little place called Tybee Island off the coast of Chatham County, Ga. decided they were going to "go rogue" with their 911 service and create their own island emergency communications system. They had many reasons for this, but the two primary ones were that the responders from Chatham County weren't as well versed about the intricacies of Tybee as the island first responders were, and because so many people

were calling 911 for things that weren't so 911 in nature. For instance, where could they take a stranded sea turtle? Could they be on the beach after sunset? These calls were infuriating 911 dispatchers in Chatham County, which was hurting communication between the public and Tybee Island.

So, even though the island could have saved about \$225,000 annually, as well as achieving interoperability with Chatham County, they decided to stick with their own service instead.

While this system is not designed to take the place of our regular 911 system, it would feature an Emergency Operations Center capable of fielding emergency calls, disseminating the calls to the appropriate agencies and logging these calls. It would allow residents a bit more security in knowing that they were being taken care of by someone they probably know by name and who might even know some of their medical background. People who would help them look for lost pets as well as pull them out of a destroyed building.

In short, a primary reason to strongly consider this system crucial for us (particularly knowing how helpless we can be in communicating with each other after a disaster scenario, thanks to Ian and Irma) is to be able to continue on with our small-town mentality and neighbors helping neighbors, especially in life-or-death situations.