



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Greg Marr and Don Maxcy familiarize themselves with the new equipment at the Consolidated Communications Center in DeLaveaga Park on Tuesday.

New 911 system should save time

Communications Center

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SANTA CRUZ — The goal is that early this morning, when 911 calls get routed to the brand new dispatch center in DeLaveaga Park, no one will notice a thing.

After four years of planning, a year of construction and an expenditure of \$5.8 million on the county's new Consolidated Communications Center, officials hope residents won't be able to tell there's been a change.

"The citizens are still going to dial 911 and hear the same thing," said Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina. "We're striving for it to be seamless."

Of course, there will be differences. Local police chiefs say the new center will be a big improvement in the way emergency services are dispatched, one that has been a long time coming.

First and foremost, the new center has been set up with a computer system that should cut emer-

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911 system

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gency response time by 30 seconds. Second, there should eventually be a significant reduction in operating costs. And third, by bringing the county's different emergency response teams together, communication and teamwork should be better, said Michael McDougall, general manager of the new center.

"They'll be better able to assist each other and back each other up," McDougall said.

The new computer system also will provide a data base for law enforcement, including analysis of crime and response.

When planning for the center began, only Watsonville had a computer system similar to the new center's, and all of the centers needed an upgrade, McDougall said. Work on the center began in April 1995.

In the past, all 911 calls have been directed to the various dispatch centers across the county. The new center consolidates dispatching for the cities

of Watsonville, Santa Cruz and Capitola and the unincorporated areas of the county.

Scotts Valley will retain its own dispatch center. It is estimated the new center will save about \$700,000 a year in operating costs within five years — the amount of time it should take to pay the overhead costs, McDougall said.

In May, there was a "glitch" in the dispatch system that resulted in all 911 callers getting nothing but a busy signal for a two-hour period. Data processors at the phone company had sent 911 calls to the new center before it was open for business.

"They were sending calls to dead air," McDougall said.

All such glitches should disappear when the new center opens, he said.

At 4:30 this morning, when calls were to begin coming in to the new center, dispatchers also were to be working at all the other centers to ensure a smooth transition, McDougall said.