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EDITORIAL: Financing 911

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The financial impact of fast-changing and improving technology – including proliferation of cellular phones as the primary telephone for many consumers – requires revisiting the financing mechanism for Mississippi’s 911 and E911 emergency call networks.

The 911 systems locate callers using land lines; an E911 system locates cellular phone users for 911 responders.

Funding for the 911 call centers statewide rests primarily on a monthly surcharge on virtually all telephone service. The 911 response number dispatches all sorts of emergency responders – police, ambulance and firefighters.

When the Legislature imposed the \$1 fee on residential lines and \$2 on business lines in the 1980s, almost everyone had only land lines. No one envisioned wholly the idea that wireless cellular communication would become ubiquitous nor that wireless service would supplant land lines as the choice of many customers.

Cellular customers pay a \$1 monthly fee, too, but only 70 cents of the fee goes to support 911 service; the private sector owners of the cellular companies get 29 cents of the fee.

The fee is more accurately a user charge – guaranteeing that all callers can have access when 911 service is needed.

We believe the Legislature and Gov. Barbour, cooperating with the Public Service Commission, 911-county-operated services, and consumers representing 911 users should be called together to discuss two issues:

- Fairness and adequacy in 911 charges levied on all kinds of consumer telephones, including on numbers of cell phones used regularly in Mississippi but registered outside the state;

- Consideration of a statewide, state-funded 911-E911 system – a system that could be tied in, if practical, with a statewide emergency communications and warning system for natural disasters and civil emergencies.

Much of the cost for 911 service has shifted to taxpayers as the fees generate proportionately less of the total necessary operating revenue.

No one in Mississippi should have to worry about the adequacy or the availability of 911 responses and systems, but ignoring the cost issues will only increase the problems many systems face.

We believe the problem is soluble if work on it is intentional.