

***Ernie Blair***  
***Director and Chief Executive Officer***  
***Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center***



*This first interview of 2009 with Ernie Blair adds to our series of interviews with business executives, government officials, academics, and area project managers published in the PMI NAC Newsletter.*

*Our goal remains to present the leading ideas and insights on the practice of project management for our readers.*

*In this interview, Ernie adds depth and detail to his lunch visit presentation in September 2008. He also makes key points about 9-1-1 management needs.*

***Ernie Blair was interviewed for the PMI-NAC Newsletter by Don Ross, PMP***

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***Ernie Blair is Director and CEO of the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center*** – a combined call-taking/dispatch operation supporting all local communication for law enforcement, fire rescue, and EMS agencies for the cities of Huntsville and Madison, and for Madison County. It is the largest 9-1-1 center in Alabama and is the state's only truly combined 9-1-1 and dispatch and communication facility.

The 28 full-time employees of the center staff three call-taker positions dedicated to taking 9-1-1 calls. Technical staff keeps all the radios, computers and telephones operating, as well as providing for the maintenance and logistics for the building, which also is hardened to withstand an F5 Tornado on the revised Fujita Scale (February 2007) that now includes an F6 as its most severe tornado category.

Another 130 staff in the center support other agencies including the Huntsville Police Department, Huntsville Fire and Rescue, and Huntsville Emergency Medical Services, Inc. The Madison County Sheriff, Madison County Fire Department, City of Madison Fire Department, and the City of Madison Police Department also use the center.

These agencies use a mix of UHF, VHF, and 800 MHz trunked and conventional radio systems.

Blair and center stakeholders are now looking at extending the concept of the combined 9-1-1 Center as a model to grow the countywide radio system, which could serve all public-safety users, as well as other city/county services. Blair is currently conducting an engineering feasibility study to determine overall costs and equitable cost distribution sharing among the potential stakeholder agencies.

Visit <http://www.madco911.com/> for more on the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center.

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***PMI-NAC: For our readers who may not be familiar with your background and work at the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center – can you give us your perspective on what you do and your use of project management principles and procedures?***

**Blair:** The Huntsville-Madison 9-1-1 Center is the largest public safety communications center in Madison County. All 9-1-1 calls come into this one location. It is also the largest such center in Alabama with about 150 people from several agencies working here.

For better or worse – I'm the landlord of the facility. My team keeps it running 24X7.

We manage everything from the computers to the bathrooms. The 9-1-1 staff located here works for me directly. We have 18 people here to cover 24-hours-a-day and 7-days-a-week of strictly 9-1-1 operations.

We also have business operations and support functions. Other staff located here work for other emergency agencies in the region including City of Madison Fire Department (MFD), City of Madison Police Department (MPD), Huntsville Fire and Rescue (HF&R), Huntsville Emergency Medical Services (HEMSI), Huntsville Police Department (HPD), Madison County Fire Department (MCFD), and the Madison County Sheriff (MCSD),

Smaller communities also get coordinated through the 9-1-1 Center. So you can see right off that it is a big operation from a headcount perspective and it is technically complex.

The other service agencies are our customers. If they demonstrate a service or technical need we could supply – I will go to my board, sell it, and get it for them.

In all, we have about 300,000 people in Madison County that are my primary customers. During the daytime, that number increases significantly as area commuters come in to work in the county.

Compare this to other jurisdictions. We are the only 9-1-1 Center under one roof in the state of Alabama. Other centers in other municipal areas are separated into fragmented operating models. Looking across the country, there are many fragmented 9-1-1 models out there. We were the only municipal region in Alabama that could accomplish this task of centralizing our operations. It comes down to politics.

We had a management objective or directive to do it. The mayor of Huntsville and the county commission chairman agreed we would do a unified model and they provided a robust, "thou shall..." statement on the goals, objectives, and scope of this initiative.

The City of Huntsville Fire and Police Department, Madison County Fire Department, and Madison County Sheriff joined us starting back in 1992. Later in 1997, when we moved to this building, the City of Madison and HEMS I joined us. Now we have everybody here working together in this facility.

Politics got this started and made it work. The mayor and county commission chairman had the vision for a unified service facility under one roof and told their different groups that they would be part of the solution. Based on that direction we developed the critical mass and some essential communication processes to make it work.

**PMI-NAC: *How does your solution relate to current theories on 9-1-1 operations?***

**Blair:** This model is a growing trend. The County of Talladega is building a 9-1-1 center based on our model. The cities of Lincoln, Sylacauga, Talladega and Talladega County will all use that center together. A number of other cities in other states also are doing this. In fact, we get quite a few inquiries and visits from town and city councils, sheriffs, and mayors coming through to look at our operating model and ask us questions.

Nashville is an excellent example of a truly Consolidated Center. They call it Metro Nashville 9-1-1 and it extends into multiple counties.

Some municipalities even go one-step further. For example, the City of Knoxville decided to totally reorganize its separate agencies. They fired everyone in existing organizations and then placed them in a new organization working in an integrated 9-1-1 model similar to our model. In addition, while we are developing more cross training in our own model – they are pursuing it far more aggressively in their solution.

It can be difficult to make these things work. It comes down to politics and the culture that develops in some agencies. How that is positioned with the professionals in the different disciplines is one of the keys to success. It involves commitment to culture change.

It's hard to get people to let go of the way they do things and try new ways of working.

**PMI-NAC: *Looking at the technologies and politics you have integrated here in the 9-1-1 Center can you give us some insights on how you manage these projects?***

**Blair:** Without being cynical – I think we often over-study project management work. I have an MBA and I've had my times in "charm school" when I was in aerospace earlier in my career. I find many people who tend to over-analyze simple things.

In my opinion, good project management involves treating your people right, listening to your people, incentivizing them, motivating them, and so on. It is keeping your people happy and giving them responsibility for the results they deliver.

Then, get out of their way and let them do it. Oversee it from a distance and make them accountable. But get out of their way. Let them get it done and encourage them to come to you when they need something.

If they need something – then go get it for them and let them run with it.

That's my philosophy of management. I see that as a Ronald Reagan, *Chairman of the Board*, approach or Jean Luc Picard – *Captain of the Enterprise*. Surround yourself with good people – ask them what they want to do – and then – based on their inputs on how to solve a problem or implement a new solution – make a decision and tell them to "*make it so.*"

Don't micromanage your people. Listen to your people. Explain yourself. Take the heat for your plans and ideas and vet what you want to do. Make sure you get buy-in on your plans and decisions. Get people on committees and ask them to review the technologies you want and vet the vendors, write the specs, and make the decisions.

Send your people out to do reference interviews in the field with possible technology options and vote on the choices and look for agreement and verification across your team.

That will usually get excellent results and there is a great deal of enthusiasm about the results for that process because the team really owns what we've put in the field.

We have a committee that meets once a month to review some of our communications issues. It's the glue that keeps us together and helps ensure we are in the right place at the right time for the right reason.

In the tour I just gave, you've seen we have a lot of electronic communication technology at our fingertips. And everything we install is effectively obsolete as soon as installation is complete. Today, this industry is changing at the speed of light it seems.

We used to answer the phone. It's a system that's driven by relays that listen to analog pulses – a phone that provides rotary-dial generated telecommunications.

So even though we live in the current world of communications technology – everything has to be backwards compatible to that rotary phone we saw as children at grandma's house. They are still out there and that was the baseline when these services began.

When I got here in 1998, cell phones were in the environment too – but not too many.

If you called from a landline – we knew where you were with about 100-percent certainty excluding errors in the database. So call from a wired telephone and we could find you and come help you. We knew where you were!

With cell phones, we didn't get a callback number because it comes through the system differently than the way numbers were delivered in the analog era. So beginning in 1998, for the first three years, if a call came from a cell phone we didn't have a number to call back on.

Then the technology came along where we got the callback number and we got what we call Phase 1 wireless 9-1-1 which gave us the location of the tower that picked up the call and a 120-degree field from that tower where the call came from. That was a wonderful advance. Now we get GPS information from cell phones. That provides us with a zone of location about the size of a football field.

Today, consider all of the ways people communicate with each other. There are PDAs, cell phones, and text-messaging devices. You think my teenager would be on the cell phone all the time. Instead she's in the back seat and giggling while she's texting her friends. I don't understand it!

But 9-1-1 can't receive a text message today. People call and say, "I've got my camera phone, can I take a picture of this wreck right here and send it to you?" No. We can't do that today and it's not just the technology but liability and legal issues as well.

We always hear "Well I can send it to my wife – why can't I send it to 9-1-1?"

So you can see for us project management can have many layers and issues that involve the work of government and legal folks in many jurisdictions. It is so complex that putting a schedule to the process is often just wishful thinking.

**PMI-NAC:** *So today the technology is screaming down the highway and you are being forced to change with it or become obsolete?*

**Blair:** The technology is being forced on me – but the government doesn't want to touch it. The problem with all of these things – people are communicating in ways that 9-1-1 is not able to support today. We need to respond – but we have to wait for the standards to catch up to us. Thus, if I bought something that's going to work, the next Blackberry is going to come out and I'll have to throw that investment away and get the new thing.

The standards aren't there first. We have national 9-1-1 groups hashing out standards but you know how that is. For example, consider Voice over IP (VoIP) calls. We're now getting VoIP calls in the 9-1-1 Center. The only way we would know where you are is if you properly coded your location into your device that you are supposed to do and register it with Vonage or your other provider.

But you bought that phone to go to Europe and travel with it and call home for free. So now you're in Europe and the hotel is on fire. You dial 9-1-1 and it rings in Huntsville: "We're at the Hilton. It's on fire."

We send the cavalry to the Huntsville Hilton. Nothing's going on there. So who called? We check and see that it's Don Ross. He lives over at this street address in Madison. Send the fire truck over there. And you're in Europe.

Despite training our folks to verify where every caller is as one of our top priorities – we are at the mercy of the technology and the providers. There's fine print to mitigate this that requires users to enter addressing for exact locations. But it's up to the individual to follow these rules. Your carrier engages in programs to ensure you understand that.

There are other technical things, very cool things, most people don't know.

For example, if you move into a house that had phone service installed – you can plug in your phone – and you'll get a dial tone and you can make two phone calls before it goes dead. One – you can call a phone company repair service and order new phone service, and two, you can call 9-1-1 even if you had not ordered phone service.

**PMI-NAC:** *From your perspective at the 9-1-1 Center in Huntsville today – what defines success for you every day?*

**Blair:** My job is to stay one step ahead and stay out of the news. If Ernie Blair and 9-1-1 are in the news – I've made a mistake.

One of the things I'm proud of – here in this building we wrote the standard procedures adopted by the FBI for dealing with Anthrax. After 911 – there were a lot of situations where someone saw a mysterious white powder somewhere and felt a need to phone that in for emergency response.

At first, no one was sure what the right response was. With increased visibility on these incidents, local law enforcement started handling every call and it was a challenge.

We wrote a specific set of procedures that were designed to help our staff manage these calls. We're a communications agency. That's what we do. So we gathered folks from all the organizations in this building – Fire, Hazmat, 9-1-1, and Police – and went through these situations and addressed what we would have to do to get these situations fixed and the variations in the scenarios to all work out for the best.

When we finished, I shared this with a friend at the FBI who then asked if he could pass that along up the chain of command for review. He got back to me later and explained they wanted to adopt our procedure for their own use.

**PMI-NAC:** *Given the work you do in the 9-1-1 Center in Huntsville today – what benefit do you see in holding PMI credentials?*

**Blair:** In our field we have an emergency services-specific credential, the Emergency Number Professional (ENP). It is similar to your PMP credential in many ways. To earn the credential, you have to demonstrate a certain level of experience in the industry, be in a management position, and jump through some other hoops before you take an incredibly exhaustive exam to become certified.

Then every four years, you have to demonstrate that you have jumped through enough hoops in the last four years and earned enough points in the system to be recertified, or you have to take that %#\$\*& test again!

The ENP is mostly management related, but also includes an emphasis on 9-1-1 specific technologies and procedures.

We certainly welcome the interest of PMI in our activities. And as good communicators, having a dialog with PMI makes us all smarter and safer than we were before.

I make an effort to get out and share our story and accomplishments with various groups around the region. That helps us improve understanding of why it's important to get your Vonage settings right but also builds awareness on the good things we're doing and that helps us stay closer to the leading edge in the service we provide to the public.

**PMI-NAC:** *Given your experience and understanding of evolutions in municipal Emergency Services – can you give us insights on what you think is in store for the 9-1-1 Center in the years ahead?*

**Blair:** Keeping up with the technology is one of my prime directives. All phones are going to VoIP. It's just a matter of time. At the same time we'll have to be backward compatible with what's left of the analog inventory out in the rural areas and around the region.

All of the location technologies and devices that are coming out is another big area for opportunities and challenges on how we do our job here in 9-1-1.

None of this is slowing down either. There is a lot of cool stuff out there. Then, factor in the need to stay vigilant on the terrorism threat. We're going to have to be interoperable with agencies coming into town and manage emerging communications requirements.

Then, there's educating the public. If you have a choice between a cell phone and a wired phone in an emergency – use the wired phone because I know almost exactly where you are.

If you have a cell phone I know "about" where you are – 78-percent of the time.

I like to say the technology is “screaming like a freight train” and we're going to have to keep up with it. That means all the politics and standards to be developed. There are a lot of challenges and dilemmas involved.

Today, I have to look on EBay for parts I need to maintain some of our hardware!

Likewise – early adoption of VoIP phones means I'll have to replace them in a couple years. We can't afford to do that. Then we have liability issues with implementation of various technologies.

Great ideas until we look at the legal impacts of a certain technology used a certain way and the potential for harm – ends up stopping a lot of creative ideas from getting through to the implementation stages.

Today, we're working hard on a statewide network that will leverage routing technologies. One PC could do the routing for the entire state. But it will take some effort to change the way things work and make sure we have the failover features we need to make it work.

We're also looking at putting in a regional radio system. There are reasons we will have to do this in the next three or four years. Parts of our radio infrastructure are obsolete and can't be maintained. Other portions are subject to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deadlines for narrowbanding transmissions analogous to the digital TV transition we're looking at now for the general public.

By January 1, 2013 – everyone is going to have to throw their radio systems away and buy new ones. Now, individually our local agencies can all build radio systems that support just one agency working alone – or we can pool our money and build a really robust and truly interoperable radio system.

That way, when incidents occur – we'll be able to cut across all the agencies with one directive that says everyone working on the plane crash, tornado, or reactor spill –go to channel 18. It will be crisp, seamless and virtually transparent to all the players except me and a handful of my staff.

You can take it further and shift certain groups to their own channels when necessary: police on one channel, ambulance on another channel, and hazmat on another. Putting together the right unified municipal radio system to support the Huntsville infrastructure will help us stay ahead of the curve as we go forward.

As 9-1-1 agencies work together – we're discovering it is more effective and efficient for us to serve larger geographic areas. Today, Huntsville reaches into Limestone County. So we cover that now. It makes just as much sense to get the rest of Limestone County under that same umbrella and share the efficiencies. And the system is robust enough that they can maintain channels for county-local business simultaneously.

But when the big one happens where we all need an ear on the same railroad track – we have it right here. That makes a tremendous difference at the end of the day.

We have virtually real-time regional information sharing that helps us save lives. That's something we all want to accomplish – and our 9-1-1 team is proud to be part of it.

### **About Ernie Blair**

*At the September 2008 PMI-NAC Luncheon – Ernie Blair showed a spectacular video about the daily workings and some of the key technology used by the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center.*

*For readers who missed the video or want to see it again – it is available at the following link:*

[http://www.hsvcity.com/video\\_files/911\\_center\\_overview.wmv](http://www.hsvcity.com/video_files/911_center_overview.wmv)

Ernie Blair is the Director and CEO of the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center. He is responsible for operation of Alabama's largest 9-1-1 Center – providing dispatch and call-taking services for all local law enforcement, fire and rescue, and emergency medical services (EMS) agencies serving Madison County. He has held this position since 1998. Prior to this, he operated a number of small businesses in the area.

He co-founded and ran AIRnet Internet Services, which served 12,000 Internet subscribers throughout Alabama before it was acquired by HiWaay Information Services in 1998.

Ernie also worked in the aerospace industry as a Business Development Manager at Harris Corporation in Melbourne, Florida. Later he was a Senior Applications Engineer for SCI Systems, Inc and a Marketing Manager at AVEX Electronics in Huntsville.

While in college, he worked as a disc jockey at WAHR-FM and was a MUZAK service technician in Huntsville and Tuscaloosa.

Ernie Blair holds Master of Business Administration and Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering degrees from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

He is an APCO Certified Public Safety Radio Technician, National Emergency Number Association (NENA) – Emergency Number Professional (ENP), and an Alabama Association of Emergency Managers (AAEM) – Basic Level Emergency Manager (BLEM).

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Thanks to Ernie Blair and the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center for information about their organization and activities provided for use in this interview published in the PMI-NAC Newsletter.

Special thanks to Sandra Wendelken, Editor, RadioResource Media Group, for permission to reuse information in the article, **9-1-1 Director Tackles Countywide Radio System**, (page 90), published in the October 2008 issue of *RadioResource MissionCritical Communications*.

To learn more about *RadioResource MissionCritical Communications*, visit <http://www.mccmag.com/>

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