

August 13, 2001

TO: Town of Mt. Washington Select Board
FROM: Mackenzie Waggaman

Re: E911 House Number By-Law and House Numbering Initiative.

Executive Summary

Interviews with local, state and federal officials: The purpose of this memo is to contribute the results of my research regarding details of the recently enacted Mt. Washington E911 House Number by-law to the Select Board. My research raises questions about the new house numbering system plan which our new E911 by-law authorizes.

All other towns have involved their citizens in consensus building: Our town's E911 by-law is based on a new house numbering system plan. The new plan will change every house number in the Town of Mt. Washington using a number derived from a 100 foot grid along every street, road and lane. This new house numbering system plan was conceived and developed over the course of four years without any public input. This is in stark contrast to the conduct of other towns who have enacted 911 numbering by-laws and implemented revised house numbering system plans. All other towns have encouraged public participation.

Is a 100' grid house numbering system the best plan for Mt. Washington? The lack of transparency and accountability in the development and implementation of the new house numbering plan has caused significant confusion and misunderstanding. No one completely understands the rationale for our town's E911 by-law and the new house numbering system mandate. No one knows if the new house numbering system is the best plan for our community.

Mt Washington is, by definition, mostly 911 address compliant. Except for a few unnamed or same named streets and roads, our town's house numbers are compliant with USPS Publication #28 guidelines upon which State 911 Addressing Standards are based. Under State 911 Addressing guidelines we must name unnamed streets and assign a new name to any duplicate street name.

The real issue is facilitating emergency response efficiency. This requires that the Select Board strictly enforce existing State fire prevention law which requires the display of visible house numbers. The other requirement is to organize house numbers in a relatively logical sequence. These two actions will satisfy the needs of emergency responders and ensure the safety of our citizens. No evidence has been presented that a wholesale revision of our Town's existing 911 compliant house numbers is required.

Research conducted – determining factors: Government officials in various cities and towns were contacted to learn about their experiences enacting E911 by-laws and developing or revising and implementing E911 compliant house numbering systems. Communities have adopted various numbering systems depending on their specific needs. Determining factors include: (1) existing extent of non-sequential house numbering, (2) existing zoning ordinances in regards to residential and commercial density, (3) extent of vacant land that is available for development, and (4) needs of Emergency Responders. Communities appear to have arrived at the following conclusion: (1) the objective of a good E911 house numbering system is to facilitate efficient emergency response, (2) the house numbering system should be scalable to fit the appropriate long term development plans of a community and be compatible with existing density requirements, and (3) every effort should be extended to minimize inconvenience to residents.

The material inconvenience of a house number change cannot be overstated:

Virtually every aspect of a person's life is affected by a change-of address. The personal inconvenience of an address change is akin to simultaneously being the victim of an identity theft and losing a wallet full of credit cards and personal identification. There is also the added burden of notifying a lifetime of personal and business correspondents and contacts and every service provider from the utility companies to schools. Under normal circumstances it can take years to complete all the required change-of-address notifications, and requires an enormous amount of effort. A change of address guarantees unforeseen interruptions and the constant threat of inconvenience in the course of daily life.

Before the Select Board implements the new house numbering system it has an obligation to be assured that the plan is the best one for our community and that the residents have an opportunity to understand the plan and its implications.

To implement a new house numbering system without enforcing the 911 by-law's signage provisions would be counterproductive; emergency response service will not be improved and the net result will be to materially inconvenience all the town's residents for no good reason.

Call to Action: The Select Board should appoint an Ad Hoc Committee to review the new house numbering system plan. The Committee's mission is to provide an unbiased report to the Select Board and to the residents at a formal Town Meeting where public participation is encouraged. If it is determined that the house numbering system plan can be improved the Select Board should make the changes necessary to tailor the house numbering system plan more closely to the specific needs of our community.