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No new 911 for Sewickley Heights

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There's no doubt residents of Sewickley Heights place a premium on privacy. It is the land of CEOs, the well-to-do and retired sports heroes, where few have house numbers and the police have their own code for identifying residences.

And as far as the borough is concerned, no newfangled technology like countywide enhanced 911 service is going to change that.

So when Allegheny County becomes the last metropolitan region of the country to implement 911 late

this summer, Sewickley Heights isn't planning to alter its routine much at all.

Not only will it continue to do its own dispatching, as is its right under the county system, it will "encourage" its 1,000 residents to program their telephones to dial directly into the borough dispatch center, Manager William Rohe said yesterday.

In other words, skip 911. Rohe said there were good reasons for doing it that way.

For one thing, without house numbers to go with streets, the

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enhanced 911 system, which is supposed to display the name and address of the caller, is useless. Borough callers who dial 911 will be sent to a regional dispatch center

in McCandless or to a county default center in Point Breeze. Those calls then will be routed back to Sewickley Heights for borough dispatchers to handle.

That can be avoided by programming phones to dial directly to the borough center, Rohe said.

In addition, the borough has not supplied house numbers to the county. For one thing, with a few exceptions, they don't exist, Rohe said. And the borough has no intention of changing that, he said.

Although the borough has yet to formally notify its residents of the plan, Rohe said he believed the majority would object to having house numbers attached to their properties because it could compromise their security and their

privacy. "This isn't a typical community. It's more of an upscale community and you know as well as I do that inquiring minds want to know," he said.

He said a combination of security and privacy issues were at work. "I guess a lot of it has to do with the anonymity. When you're, quote, in the limelight, you don't want [the attention]. A lot of it has to do with security," he said.

Residents, particularly former

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Sewickley Heights exempt from using enhanced 911

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sports stars who live in the borough, "don't want the public to show up at the front porch or rubber necking."

But county 911 Coordinator W. Brad Magill believes the borough is making a mistake by encouraging residents to program their phones to dial their own dispatch center rather than provide the information needed for enhanced 911.

"I think that's a disservice to the residents," he said.

If the power goes out, he said, phones have to be reprogrammed to dial the number. If an intruder enters the house and rips the phone out of the wall while the resident is dialing emergency help, the dispatcher has no way of knowing where the call is coming from. With enhanced 911, the address would still be displayed, he said.

The same applies if someone dialing for emergency help is unable to talk. Borough dispatchers would have trouble tracing the call, he said. With enhanced 911, the address is available.

"I'm not sure the public fully understands the implication," he said.

Rohe conceded that such scenarios were possible. But he said he didn't see enhanced 911 as a big

issue in a borough with 1,000 residents and 300 homes.

He said assigning house numbers would not be an easy task. Many houses are on private drives far from main thoroughfares. Therefore, a county request to put house numbers on mailboxes as part of 911 implementation would be useless, Rohe said.

In many cases now, police must escort emergency vehicles to calls to make sure they go to the right house. That probably would not change even with house numbers, he said.

When police respond to a call, they use code numbers to identify the residence, he said. At one point the borough supplied those to the county only to find, to its horror, that some ended up in the phone book. Magill said that was a mistake.

Magill said other municipalities without house numbers had assigned them as part of the move to countywide 911. And he pointed out other communities populated by CEOs and celebrities which have provided the information.

"Fox Chapel has people who don't want anyone to know where they live. But they have real addresses. And when they dial 911 we will have the addresses," he said.