

'SEVEN TO THREE MAKES IT EASY'

911 Program Benefits Residents, County Visitors

BY TERRY POPE

One person who helped bring 911 to Brunswick County has a favorite saying: From seven to three makes it easy.

For any emergency—in need of a fire department, rescue squad or police officer—Brunswick County residents can now dial 911 rather than seven-digit telephone numbers to get help.

The 911 communications program was scheduled to begin in late April after years of planning and preparation.

Lee Hitchcock was hired in 1990 as the county's 911 program planner. His job was to help coordinate the effort to bring the system on-line. He can think of thousands of ways 911 will benefit area property owners, residents and tourists of a coastal community like Brunswick County.

"There are a lot of people who rent homes here, especially during the summer," said Hitchcock. "They may know 911, but don't have the other numbers in their head. The big thing is, you no longer have to look up those seven-digit numbers."

Preparing for 911 involved more than just building a new communications center at the Brunswick County

Government Center in Bolivia. Planners worked for months naming and renaming more than 3,800 county streets and roads. They also helped municipalities eliminate duplicate street names.

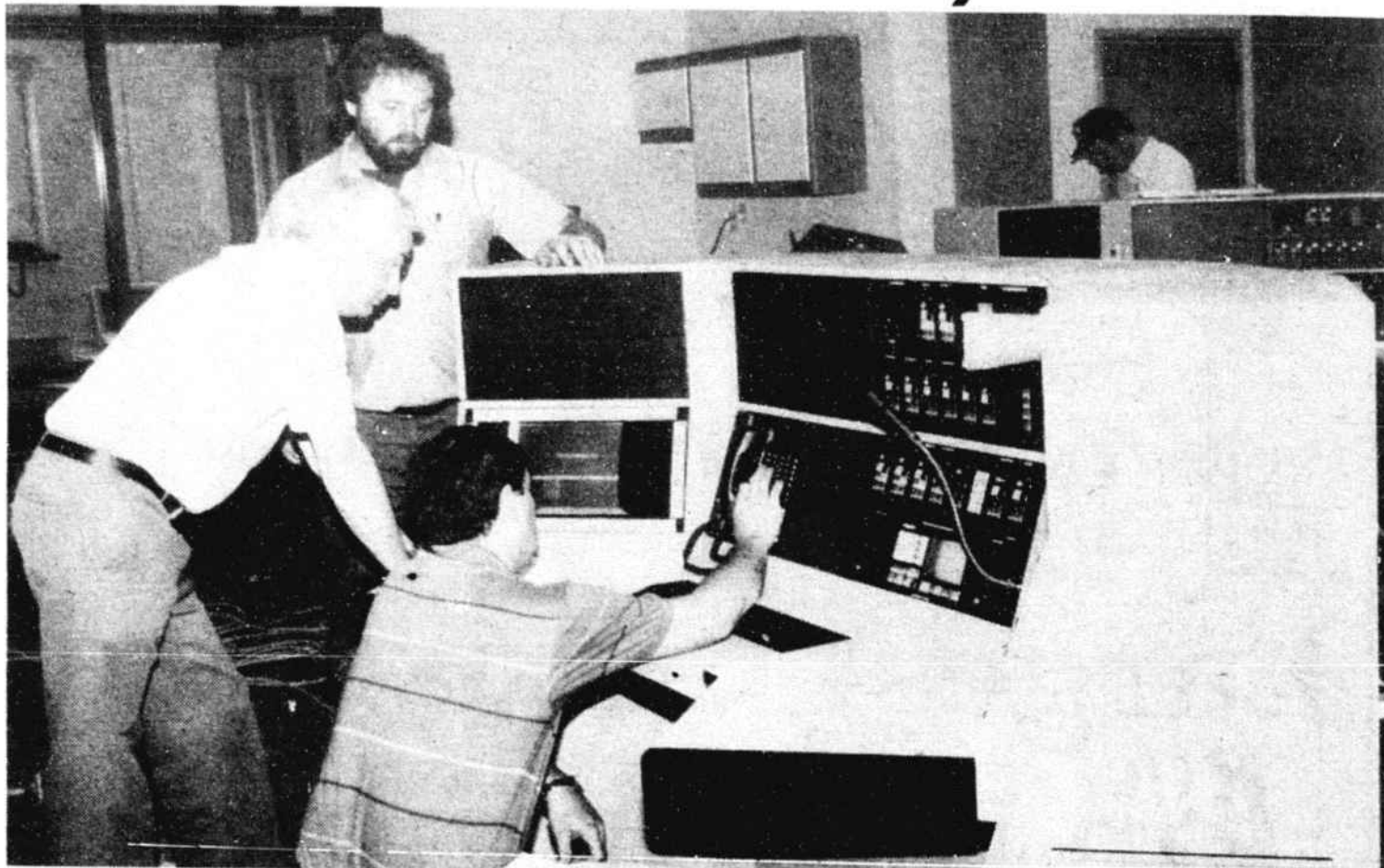
Rural routes are also out this year. The U.S. Postal Service worked with county planners to replace all rural routes with street names and house numbers. The new mail system is designed to help pinpoint the location of an emergency for quicker response times.

When complete, monitors at the communications center will display the location of a call under Brunswick County's enhanced 911 system. If a person dials 911 but is unable to speak or to give directions, the location is shown on the monitor.

With five telephone lines coming into the center, the likelihood of a caller getting a busy signal is slim, said Hitchcock, who has also worked in other counties as a dispatcher. He has a few success stories as a dispatcher that can testify to the effectiveness of 911.

In Horry County, S.C., Hitchcock took a 911 call from a woman who said she thought there was a stranger in her house.

"She was living by herself and



STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

ATLANTIC TELEPHONE employees work to install 911 equipment inside the communications center. Pictured are (from front) David Sellers, Doug Huddle and Larry Hites.

was afraid," said Hitchcock, who kept the caller on the line until a police car arrived at the home.

"They did find a prowler in her house," he said.

In Redding, Conn., he took a call from a nervous resident who was new to the neighborhood. The house across the street was on fire. Hitchcock had to obtain the location of the fire from an address on the monitor. The fire department was less than a mile away.

"The caller had recently moved into the area," said Hitchcock, "but she was acquainted with 911," he said.

When persons do call 911, they should still give information on where the emergency is located. Sometimes, an address could be wrong on the monitor.

"Where they are calling from might not be where the incident happened," he said. "It may be down the street or across the street."

There are 20 fire departments, 10 rescue squads, nine municipal police departments and the Brunswick County Sheriff Department whose calls will be dispatched through the 911 program 24 hours a day.

"It's a centralized system," said Hitchcock. "It's a lot faster and will

give us more information on the location of an incident immediately."

Recent television shows also demonstrate the effectiveness of 911. In North Carolina, 911 programs are usually countywide. In some northern states, such as Maryland and Delaware, 911 systems are statewide.

"There are so many visitors from other communities that have 911," said Hitchcock.

But for residents and visitors not familiar with 911 programs, Hitchcock has only one thing to say: From seven to three makes it easy. Just dial 911.

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