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## Today's Front Page



## News

### Rescue squad talks resume

By Michael Ryan

MOUNTAINTOP — History could be repeating itself in terms of local emergency medical services, following a recent meeting of the Mountaintop Supervisors and Mayors Association.

MSMA members, as they do every month, gathered to discuss issues common to their neighboring towns and villages, hobnobbing in crackerbarrel fashion and also doing official deeds.

A familiar topic popped up when Jewett Town Supervisor Michael Flaherty took the floor, talking about the possibility and feasibility of forming a mountaintop ambulance district.

Four years have passed since the idea was initially raised, ultimately wilting on the vine as some municipalities clung to the hope their volunteer rescue squads could survive and prosper.

Things have significantly changed, however, with the town of Lexington being the latest to report that a growing number of emergency calls are going unanswered.

Lexington had been one of the more solvent units and remains relatively strong, fielding a solid group of young volunteers, according to town supervisor Dixie Baldrey.

Baldrey, however, also noted that many of those squad members are unavailable during normal weekday work hours, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., creating a potentially dangerous void.

The situation in Lexington is "not good," Baldrey said, and efforts are currently underway to come up with fresh options which could include going to a fulltime or parttime paid service.

Similar scenarios have unfolded in the town of Ashland, where EMT's and drivers are now hired to be oncall in 12 hour shifts, and in Prattsville, which relies on an ever-thinning crew of volunteers.

Prattsville, in fact, has entered into a contract with Ashland, covering the same blue collar work hours Lexington is finding itself increasingly unable to fulfill.

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Jewett, for the past few years, has contracted with the town of Windham for emergency services, while Windham, long ago, decided to bite the bullet and employ fulltime professionals.

Windham owns two ambulances and staffs paramedic-level personnel on a 24/7 basis, a remedy that is both expensive and complicated, according to town supervisor T. Patrick Meehan.

Meehan said his town hopes to build a new ambulance headquarters soon, wanting to modernize the operation and avoid paying \$1200 in monthly rent as it presently does for the use of a garage.

Windham must also contend with the cost of replacing equipment, required regularly to keep up with Department of Health standards, and the persistent maintenance of the ambulances.

"There are scheduling issues too, even with paid personnel," added James Miltenberger, a Windham town councilman who serves as liason between the town board and ambulance unit.

Meehan, while pleased to provide the citizenry with quality emergency services and committed to continue doing so, wouldn't lose any sleep if life were otherwise.

Theoretically the ambulance ledgers should balance, with Windham charging insurance providers for treating patients, but the reality is that billing and collecting are twin nightmares.

"If somebody told me we could have a county-wide ambulance, I'd be a happy camper," Meehan said, noting Windham's new headquarters alone might cost as much as \$1 million to complete.

All of which led Flaherty to suggest that the time may have come to revisit the concept of a mountaintop ambulance district, even though it would be complex.

"We've got people's lives at stake," Flaherty said. "By no means will this be an easy fix, but this might be something we want to seriously consider before it becomes an even greater problem."

Flaherty reminded everyone that the mountaintop faced very similar circumstances some years ago when the Catskill hospital closed, causing concerns about pre-emergency room care.

Eight visionary towns got together, including Windham, Ashland, Jewett and Prattsville, to organize what would later become the so-called Fly Cars, which are now a model of proficiency.

Four fully-equipped ambulances are stationed throughout Greene County, providing advanced life support to victims on the scene with a team of highly-trained paramedics.

The system is not perfect. Patients cannot be transported to hospitals by the

Fly Cars, but the county legislature and virtually every town has signed onto, and financially supports, the program.

Flaherty said the same type of grassroots effort is necessary again, specifically for mountaintop towns and villages who have a symbiotic geography and economy.

“Even if we start out small, I think it would be wise to start thinking toward a shared ambulance district,” Flaherty said, suggesting Jewett, Lexington and Windham could get the ball rolling.

Efficient administration is vital and logistical questions would need to be resolved, centrally housing the ambulances, but it’s been done before, with the Fly Cars, and can be done again, Flaherty said.

Meehan said Windham is, “willing to listen,” and Baldrey said, “it makes sense,” noting Lexington is already reaching out to nearby agencies, such as the town of Hunter, seeking lasting solutions.

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