

Trumansburg, Ulysses spar over EMS issues

Village to start charging for ambulance service

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TRUMANSBURG -- Elected officials from the Town of Ulysses and the Village of Trumansburg clashed at an inter-municipal meeting Monday night over parts of an ambulance billing policy the village will be implementing for its residents starting Friday.

The village has given Ulysses and the towns of Hector and Covert, which contract with it for ambulance service, two options: Bill all residents for service to offset the cost to taxpayers, or continue to offer a subsidized ambulance service, at a higher cost to the taxpayer base.

After years of discussion of the various options available to prevent the costs of emergency medical services from rising as more paid staff was required, Trumansburg finally unilaterally proposed a policy that would bill every person who receives an ambulance ride at rates equivalent to the highest commercial rates in the area.

The billing policy also includes a charity provision for low-income individuals. Towns will have to opt in to start billing their residents, as their present EMS contracts with the village extend through 2011.

"If a town decides not to go to billing, it will remain as it is," said Mayor Marty Petrovic, trying to assuage concerns about new billing policies.

Ulysses has decided to not vote to allow billing to proceed there until town officials have further reviewed the policies and procedures, which town board member Elizabeth Thomas said had not yet been provided in a final form. She also noted they did not have input on the policies.

"To our knowledge, we still don't have the billing policy in hand," she said. "I would make a clear plea that we would really have liked to be a part of the discussion before the billing policies are decided. We really do need to have a say."

Thomas also criticized the village for not adequately informing their own residents, less than a week before the policy goes into effect.

"There was no public information meeting about this whole thing, so anyone who gets into an accident into the village won't be aware of this," she said. "I have a problem with things not being open."

Village officials said they plan to have a mass mailing and a possible public information meeting once the policy is in effect in the village.

Residents of Ulysses, Hector and Covert and those needing ambulance rides within their borders will not be billed, at least until those town's boards decide how they will proceed.

Village starting billing

Village trustee Rordan Hart said even though Trumansburg has had to formulate billing policies so it could go ahead with its own roll-out of billing, the village will be open to changes, provided the towns contract with the village for billing.

"Within six months we would be open to amending policies based on the input of towns," he said.

Ulysses board members have continually accused the village of failing to keep the town apprised of new developments on the issue, and communication issues have plagued the discussions between the two governments.

Still at issue, say Ulysses board members, is how much control the towns will have over the EMS department's budget, and how much the policy will protect the under-insured and low-income individuals who don't qualify for charity care.

In addition, the village has also linked its contracts for EMS service and fire service, in effect forcing the towns to contract with the village unless they want to find another fire company to contract with as well.

Ulysses has taken issue with that requirement, as board member Kevin Romer said it will prevent Ulysses from possibly contracting with a private service for ambulance care, but Mayor Petrovic said financially the village had no choice but to require all or none.

"We're all linked together, and it would be a hardship if Ulysses pulled out," Petrovic said.

Ulysses seeks role

At the meeting Ulysses, which pays for more of the budget than Trumansburg, pressed the village for more oversight of the newly created EMS department.

Village Deputy Mayor Debbie Nottke said the village would consider creating an EMS review board that would serve in an advisory role to the village board and would be composed of members of all the boards.

Village trustee Rordan Hart explained that the village will take care of residents who can't afford the bill, which will range between \$500 and \$1,050 per trip, depending on the type of call and whether advanced life support is needed.

Those without insurance who can demonstrate their income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty line can apply to be considered a charity case, and have their fee paid for in full or reduced.

Residents who qualify as low-income and underinsured patients will have their liability limited to between 10 and 30 percent of their annual household income, he said, and payment plans will be available to any resident who asks for one.

Hart said he could not speak for future village boards, but said he will never vote to allow the billing company MedEx to take residents who do not pay their bills to collection. He said volunteer firefighters who need an ambulance ride will also be billed for the service.

Thomas said although she has many issues with how the village has handled the situation, she anticipates that they will eventually work out their differences on EMS policies.

"We'll work it all out. It's just been an extremely painful process," she said.