

News

## Empire Ambulance set to take over ambulance services in Saratoga Springs and Greenfield

Tuesday, November 22, 2011

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SARATOGA SPRINGS - Plans call for a new company to assume control of ambulance coverage within the Spa City and Greenfield, but officials say the switch won't alter service, employment levels or pricing.

With revenue dwindling, the Board of Directors of Saratoga Emergency Medical Services, a nonprofit that has provided ambulance protection to Saratoga Springs since the 1960s, voted to transfer its operating certificate to the for-profit Empire Ambulance. The certificates are issued by the state Department of Health and are a requirement for the operation of an ambulance company.

The move needs to be approved by the Regional EMS Council of the Hudson Mohawk Valleys, which has a meeting scheduled for next Monday, though Saratoga County EMS Coordinator Mike McEvoy said it's more of a rubber-stamp process.

"I can't see anybody objecting to it," he said. "If they did, there'd be no grounds."

According to forms filed with the Internal Revenue Service, SEMS lost \$54,830 in 2010, which left its surplus at \$284,000. SEMS President Clark Hayward said the problem is that insurance reimbursements don't come close to what it costs to operate the ambulance service. It's the same problem that has plagued the county's Maplewood Manor nursing home.

SEMS will likely report a greater loss this year, Hayward said, and looming changes in healthcare reform don't bode well for his company's finances. If the squad were to go bankrupt, the Department of Health would take away its certificate.

"We don't want to run out the clock here," Hayward said.

SEMS has been "working for quite some time to try and solve the financial dilemma," he said, but transferring the certificate to Empire Ambulance is SEMS' best option. It goes the furthest towards the organization's goals of not interrupting ambulance service within its coverage area while maintaining its employment levels.

"It should not affect the service at all," Empire Ambulance President Steve Retzlaff said, adding his company intends to keep as many of SEMS 40-plus paid emergency medical technicians and paramedics as possible.

Hayward said Empire, as a larger company, has larger resources that put them in a better financial position when it comes to operating emergency services in Saratoga Springs. Empire currently houses two ambulances in Saratoga Springs that transport patients from Saratoga Hospital to other hospitals like Albany Medical Center and it also operates ambulance services in Troy and Glens Falls.

"That's a huge chunk of revenue that we're not even in a position to be able to compete with," Hayward said.

If the transaction goes through - and both sides say there's no reason it won't - Empire Ambulance will begin to assume control of ambulance operations within Saratoga Springs and the Town of Greenfield within the next 30 days during a transitional period while the deal is finalized. Empire Ambulance will purchase the company's assets at fair market value, Hayward said, and SEMS will legally cease to exist.

The Attorney General needs to approve the switch from a nonprofit to for-profit, Hayward said, though SEMS attorneys don't see any problem with the change.

Mayor Scott Johnson said he and Public Safety Commissioner Richard Wirth will meet with Empire Ambulance next week to discuss the changeover.

He noted that there's no formal contract between SEMS and the city the certificate of need serves as a de facto contract. The company doesn't receive any tax-based funding from the city, Hayward said, and only receives \$45,000 annually from Greenfield. According to the IRS forms, its expenses in 2010 exceeded \$1.3 million.

"I welcome working with them," Johnson said of Empire Ambulance, adding the company's for-profit status may eventually result in an improvement in ambulance coverage as the company expands.

But Christian Mathiesen, who will replace Wirth as head of the city's Public Safety department next year, said he was disappointed that the deal went through so quickly. He said it would have been a good opportunity for city officials to engage in dialogue about the future of the city's ambulance coverage, including possibly increasing the fire department's role in the process to bring the city some additional revenue.

"I think this should have been a more open procedure," he said.

Empire is also seeking to acquire the defunct Corinth Emergency Squad's certificate of need. The Hudson-Mohawk Council voted down the proposal last month because there were questions about the certificate's validity, but Retzlaff said Empire is appealing that vote. In the interim, the town's ambulance service has been provided by a new squad that has been operating on a temporary certificate.

Retzlaff and Hayward said there won't be a change in the billing process, as most regional agencies price emergency services fairly close in range.

The bottom line, Hayward said, is that when residents call 911 and request an ambulance, the same paramedics will still transport them to a hospital. It'll just be run by a different company.

"The community and employees should really see it as business as usual," Hayward said.

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