

News

Saratoga Springs City Council authorizes city fire department to take over ambulance services

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — The Saratoga Springs Fire Department has authorization from the city council to operate ambulance service in the Spa City on a temporary basis.

The council voted 4 to 1 to approve the measure Tuesday after a lengthy meeting that included more than two hours of public comment on the subject.

Mayor Scott Johnson was the long vote against the resolution and called it premature. "This has all the signs of a quick fix," he said.

"I can't support this, this is premature. I can't believe the rest of the council is support this resolution when there are so many unanswered questions."

Public Safety Commissioner Christian Mathiesen said "It has been discussed for years."

"This is about putting the ambulance in service, something we have been talking about for a long time," he said. "This is the first step in having the Fire Department provide ambulance services."

Johnson, though, said Tuesday's vote was "a classic example about the lack of transparency," because he and most of the public did not know the vote was coming at the City Council meeting. "I think the public is going to be shocked to wake up and realize this vote took place."

The resolution authorizes the city file for a municipal certificate of need, known as a Muni-Con, that would allow the fire department to use their ambulance to transport patients to the hospital, a service that to date was provided by Saratoga Emergency Medical Services.

SEMS informed city officials in late 2011 that it is likely to fold within the next two months. The non-profit has been providing the city with ambulance services for decades and collecting payments from patients' insurance carriers. Although the city's fire department responds to the majority of medical calls and provides both basic and advanced life support, because they are not the agency transporting patient to the hospital they collect no insurance money.

The resolution approved Tuesday, which was brought by newly-elected Mathiesen, was amended after discussion to include reviews of the ambulance service 12 and 18 months after the fire department takes over.

Mathiesen expressed concern that without the resolution's passage the city could be left in a lurch, without any ambulance service for residents, when SEMS folds.

"This is an appropriate time to put that ambulance into service," Mathiesen said, referring to the ambulance the city's fire department already has and uses to respond to medical calls in the city.

Saratoga Springs Fire Chief Robert Williams said "nothing is changing," in terms of the services his department provides. "The only thing different is that we will be riding in our own ambulances," he said. "We're already doing it."

Another change will be the revenue collected by the city fire department for its ambulance services. Proponents feel that revenue could be a boon for the city.

Public Works Commissioner Anthony "Skip" Scirocco supported the resolution. "It just makes a lot of sense. They are here already, they are doing the job ... I think it can generate enough revenue to support it."

Not on the agenda Tuesday night was discussion of which organization will provide a supporting role for the fire department. The city can choose between a private company, such as Empire or Mohawk Ambulance Services and a non-profit, such as the Wilton or Malta municipal EMS providers or the Community Emergency Corps out of Ballston Spa.

Comments from the public on the city's ambulance services were varied. Some offered support of the fire department taking over ambulance service, others staunchly opposed it, saying private companies could offer the same care, cheaper.

Some of the opposition centered on the cost of additional fire department staff that may be needed to fulfill the ambulance responsibilities.

"We're going to have to pay additional benefits, we're going to have to pay additional pensions that go on and on and on," Dave Bronner said during the public workshop.

Mayor Johnson requested a report generated by the Fire Department's union in 2007 that indicated the fire department needed an additional 10 firefighters to take over ambulance service in the city.

"I want to see that report that was issued in 2007," Johson said before voting against the resolution. "When I ask the fire chief for a report and do not get it in time to be able to cast an informed vote, there's something wrong with the system."

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