

Washington County EMS still in limbo

Written by George Browning

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Washington County is not any closer to having permanent ambulance service following the commissioners' meeting Tuesday.

The commissioners were expecting representatives from Knox and Switzerland counties as well as Columbus to present proposals, but only Switzerland County was present.

Switzerland County EMS Director Randy See gave the commissioners a figure of \$330,000 to help Washington County until its own organization, which would provide EMS service could be formed.

See said establishing a non-profit EMS service in Washington County shouldn't take longer than three months, but should it take longer Switzerland County was willing to be here for up to six months.

One of the delays in starting a local group is that it takes up to three months to be reimbursed by insurance organizations and Medicare. Until that reimbursement the county would be required to foot that entire bill while waiting to recover some of that money.

The commissioners were thrown off by the amount Switzerland County would charge for the six months of service considering they only budgeted \$300,000 for EMS for all of 2010. Of that \$300,000, \$20,000 will be used to pay on one of the ambulances.

"I really appreciate the proposal, I am just concerned at how we are going to pay for it," said Commissioner President Lana Sullivan. ". . . I don't know what to say. I realize the importance of the service and the local EMS employees, I just don't know how we can accept a contract like this. The county just doesn't have this kind of money."

Fellow Commissioners John Mishler and Dave Brown expressed equal concern.

See said the amount is based on the fact that it costs his company \$600 every time it makes an ambulance run and that his group did not stand to make any money from the proposal.

A number of employees of the local EMS were on hand expressing concern and some even offered suggestions.

Tony Floyd suggested the county consider establishing an EMS tax, which is similar to the tax that some residents pay for fire service.

"I know in politics it's never good to talk about raising taxes," Floyd said, "but I think people wouldn't complain if a portion of their taxes went to provide quality ambulance service."

Sullivan agreed that people in the community wouldn't be opposed, but said even if that's something the commissioners were going to consider, it will take a long time to establish. At the time of the meeting there were just 23 days remaining until Washington County Memorial Hospital's contract to provide ambulance service to the county expires.

"We're running out of time and this something we need now," she said.

The long term solution is for the local EMS service to basically be a self-supporting entity. However, money, space and the time for reimbursement to be received are the initial problems.

The county is looking at the possibility of purchasing the property of Richard and Patricia Williams on the corner Anson Street and State Road 56.

Again, purchasing the property could take a while and with the deadline facing the EMS contract, it doesn't offer a short-term solution.

The commissioners asked current EMS Director Troy Nicholson to work with See on trying to come up with a more workable solution.

It that is not an option Nicholson was asked to come up with other alternatives prior to the Commissioners next meeting Dec. 16.

"We can call a special meeting if need be," Sullivan told Nicholson. "If you come up with something and we need to act sooner let me know."

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For more on the commissioners' meeting, check out the December 16 issue of The Washington County Edition.