

EMTs ask hospital board to keep ambulance public

Workers say they'll cooperate to cut expenses

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Sept. 30, 2010

The Quincy Valley Medical Center's monthly board meeting lasted a marathon three hours on Monday night as the bulk of the meeting was devoted to the possibility of privatizing the center's ambulance service.

The hospital's conference room was overflowing with members of the public, hospital staff and ambulance crew. Emotions were high after a week of buildup between the Quincy City Council meeting where the matter was discussed last Tuesday and the Monday meeting.

To start the meeting, board chairman Anthony Gonzalez said he welcomed those in attendance, but did not welcome the people who came to his home or sent him private communications regarding the ambulance service. Other board members said they had also been contacted in ways they said were inappropriate and wanted those kinds of communications to stop.

ADVERTISEMENT Hospital administrator Mehdi Merred and Gonzalez also referred to a heated discussion that happened after the council meeting between hospital officials, public members and ambulance service personnel. Both called the behavior of some ambulance employees disrespectful.

"While this meeting is being conducted, let's keep this respectful," Gonzalez said before taking questions from the audience.

Fred Hobbs, a long-time EMT with the ambulance service, said he wanted to see the ambulance service stay with the hospital.

"I think letting go of this service would be a mistake," Hobbs said. "I just don't see this contract service doing the right thing. I would like you to consider giving us another chance."

Kelly Hobbs said she thought the hospital could find ways to make the ambulance service profitable considering that there was only an \$18,000 to \$25,000 annual loss.

Merred said the hospital learned last week that the loss in revenue is actually higher than those figures because of how the hospital receives reimbursements from the government.

He explained that since the hospital receives less reimbursement for the work performed by ambulance service personnel than for other hospital services, the loss is estimated to be closer to \$93,000 each year.

Kelly Hobbs also said she didn't understand how AMR would be able to make a profit in Quincy if the hospital can't make money.

Rocco Roncarati, Eastern Washington general manager for AMR, said his company has lower costs because it can purchase services and equipment at a higher volume than the Quincy hospital can.

"We see 35 to 40 percent discounts on our costs," he said. "We buy by volume."

Board member Darrell Van Dyke underscored that point when he said, "We're a little mom and pop store and they're Wal-Mart."

Roncarati added that his company is interested in coming to Quincy because it is already serving Grant County Fire District No. 5 and would like to increase its presence in the county. He added that the company would likely need the \$208,000 annual subsidy from Grant County Fire District No. 3 and the City of Quincy to make the service viable.

"We're looking at revenues of about \$503,000 without the subsidy and an operating cost of about \$629,000," Roncarati said. "We're upside down without the subsidy."

LeRoy Schaapman asked the board if the fact that the ambulance service workers went union factored into the matter.

Gonzalez said the union didn't make a difference. Roncarati said his company works with union labor in other areas.

Doug Martin, the Quincy ambulance service captain, said he wanted to see his department work with the board and administration to cut costs and keep the service public.

"A lot of us have put our whole life into this service," Martin said. "We have made it what it is. It is hard to see it dismantled. I understand the finances. I'll lead by example. If you switch my hourly rate to salary, that would save about \$20,000 right there.

"I am your number one fan. I know you guys have supported us 100 percent. It's hard for all of us. We are part of this community and we're not a number here. I worked for AMR for two years. They really know what they're doing. But they're so big there, you're a number. I think if the board is willing to give us another chance, I think the staff is willing to do what we have to do to be a team and work together."

Gonzalez said the board would take the comments it received during the meeting under consideration. He added that the board is only in the discussion phase of the issue.

