

Story originally printed in the La Crosse Tribune or online at www.lacrossetribune.com

Published - Friday, June 15, 2007

City agrees to initial mediation on ambulance issue

By KATE SCHOTT | La Crosse Tribune

La Crosse officials agreed Thursday to attend a July mediation session with the county, Tri-State Ambulance and area hospital officials to discuss possibly providing ambulance service for city residents.

While it gave city officials permission to attend the July 10 meeting, the Common Council wants to discuss the issue further next month and potentially give its blessing for continued mediations.

Council member George Italiano introduced a resolution Thursday that would allow the city to enter mediation with La Crosse County, Tri-State Ambulance Service/Gundersen Lutheran and Franciscan Skemp after the July meeting.

While he's "not necessarily for" the city providing ambulance service, Italiano said, he wants to move the issue along.

The request for mediation, which initially came from Mayor Mark Johnsrud, arose after city officials indicated they wanted to explore having the fire department provide ambulance service.

But Tri-State officials said fracturing the system could hurt the quality of emergency medical services to the rest of county, a concern shared by county officials. Tri-State, owned by Gundersen Lutheran since 2001, has provided ambulance service in the county for 35 years.

Having the city provide the service would be more efficient, improve services and potentially provide new revenue, Johnsrud has argued.

The fire department already sends first responders and emergency medical technicians to nearly all medical emergencies in the city and would train its EMTs as paramedics if it added ambulance service, he has said.

County and Tri-State officials say they support improving the system but are skeptical a city ambulance service could maintain four core principles: regional delivery, clinical quality, control overall health care costs and be collaborative and inclusive of partners.

The July 10 meeting asks the "mediator to determine if we should go into mediation," Johnsrud said.

That will be determined by where each party stands, Tri-State Director Matt Zavadsky said, and what guidelines should be followed if the process moves forward. If further mediation occurs, Johnsrud and Zavadsky agreed a state official with EMS knowledge should be included.

The county has hired Madison attorney and mediator Howard Bellman for the July 10 session, at a cost of \$250 an hour, plus expenses.

The session will not be open to the public, County Administrator Steve O'Malley said Wednesday.

Other Council Action

The La Crosse Common Council took the following actions Thursday:

Combining city departments

The vote: Approved, 12-6

The proposal: To make the Building and Inspections Department a division of a retitled Planning and Development Department. City Planner Larry Kirch would oversee it, with Bill Branson as chief inspector for the Inspections division. City officials estimate it will save up to \$100,000 annually, since the Inspections department head position will be eliminated. The new department will move to City Hall's third floor later this year.

In favor: Jon Olson, George Italiano, Jai Johnson, Jacie Gamroth, Bill Harnden, Dorothy Lenard, Doug Farmer, Audrey Kader, Bernard Maney, Tom Sweeney, Joe Ledvina and Dick Swantz.

Against: Andrea Richmond, Jim Bloedorn, Richard Becker, Bruce Ranis, Bernard Maney and Marilyn Wigdahl.

Reducing capital borrowing

The vote: Failed, 3-14

The proposal: To require the city reduce capital borrowing by \$667,500 a year for 10 years, introduced by council member Jim Bloedorn, who felt the city needs to live within its means. By cutting borrowing for a decade, the money saved on interest can be added to the general budget, he argued. The state restricts municipal indebtedness to 5 percent of the city's total equalized value, and the city has a policy to limit borrowing to 75 percent of the state ceiling, finance director Gene Pfaff has said. Under those, the city can accrue \$109 million in borrowing; it has borrowed \$96 million.

Against: Jon Olson, George Italiano, Jai Johnson, Jacie Gamroth, Bill Harnden, Dorothy Lenard, Richard Becker, Doug Farmer, Audrey Kader, Bernard Maney, Tom Sweeney, Joe Ledvina, Marilyn Wigdahl and Dick Swantz.

In favor: Andrea Richmond, Jim Bloedorn and Bruce Ranis.

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