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Ambulance talks begin Tuesday

By REID MAGNEY / La Crosse Tribune

The La Crosse area ambulance controversy goes to mediation Tuesday, and officials hope keeping it out of the spotlight will calm the waters.

"My hope is we will move this from a debate in the media to a debate among the entities," said La Crosse County Board Chairman Steve Doyle.

"We'll bring something back to the public so that the public can see what's going on and say 'Yes, we think that's good,' or 'No, we don't think that's the right direction,' before anything would be adopted."

At issue is La Crosse possibly starting its own ambulance service, run by the fire department. But Tri-State Ambulance and a number of officials fear it would hurt service outside the city.

Doyle told the board Thursday officials from the city and county, Franciscan Skemp and Gundersen Lutheran, which owns Tri-State, will meet for an all-day session.

The meetings will be closed. Doyle asked the public's indulgence, so mediation can go on "where people aren't beating on their chests or waving flags or whatever, because I think it will be more satisfying of an ending."

Supervisors had many questions.

"What are you mediating?" asked Supervisor John Medinger. "Doesn't there have to be a proposal on the table?"

"Well, there have been ideas that have floated around, let's say that," Doyle said. "And ideas eventually become proposals, is my understanding of how things work out in the world."

Doyle said he and County Administrator Steve O'Malley sought mediation because "it just seemed counterproductive for people to be screaming at each other, and so we were the proponents of mediation, saying we've got to get people to stop taking shots at each other, we've got to try to get people on the same page."

Doyle wouldn't predict how long mediation might take.

He said all the parties will have to agree unanimously before any information is released. "The people who are participating are very sensitive to the concerns of the public to know what's going on and not to do some secret deal-making or anything like that."

Supervisors Bernie Maney and George Hammes expressed concerns if La Crosse starts a city ambulance service, the county may be asked to subsidize Tri-State's service to the suburbs and

rural areas.

"One thing city taxpayers have to remember," Hammes said, "is that 37 percent of our budget comes from city taxpayers, so they may make a little money on the ambulance, but they may pay some in another form, and it may end up costing them more."

Doyle said all four parties to the mediation are equally sharing the cost of hiring a mediator, up to \$5,000 each.

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