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We don't have enough information to make the ambulance decision

By Tribune staff

La Crosse city officials have once again proposed getting into the ambulance business — this time with just one ambulance that would work in concert with Tri-State Ambulance.

In addition, the city promises to train 12 firefighters to be paramedics — to work the ambulances and to have one paramedic on every first responder call.

City officials say this won't cost the taxpayers anything. Should we believe them? We can't say because we don't have enough information.

And that means we should be very cautious about this plan — and we should insist on full financial and medical information about the plan.

Let's consider finances first. City officials say they can train 12 firefighters to be paramedics, purchase two ambulances, even though only one will be in service. It will take a year to get set up. The city says training, setup and four years of ambulance service will cost \$1.2 million. The city says it can get \$1.2 million in fees from patients during that four-year period, enough to pay for the program.

Is that right?

Tri-State official Matt Zavadsky said it costs his company \$650,000 a year to keep one ambulance running for one year.

One difference is that city firefighters are already on the payroll, so the city would only have to include the costs of their salary upgrades in the total.

Still, would that be enough? Keep in mind that La Crosse already is a high-tax city, and it has many other things to spend money on, not the least of which is the Bliss Road reconstruction. Can we afford to have the city enter into an ambulance service when a private business already is doing that without a taxpayer subsidy?

Tri-State is a subsidiary of Gundersen Lutheran, which is the city's largest employer and taxpayer. Does it make sense for the city to potentially be taking revenue away from its largest taxpayer?

Let's also consider the medical implications. Franciscan Skemp Healthcare CEO Dr. Robert Nesse said at a public meeting Wednesday that he doesn't have the information he needs to decide whether this is a good idea.

"It's hard for me to judge what's needed unless we agree about what data is available," he said. "There isn't enough information out there right now."

He said the two most important pieces of information are:

- What is the ambulance response time now in La Crosse? Nesse said a six-minute response time would be good. Eleven or 12 minutes would not be as good, particularly for a cardiac case.

- What is the right number of paramedics for a metro area the size of La Crosse's? Like doctors, paramedics need to do a certain number of procedures on a regular basis to keep their skills up. What is that number? And how many paramedics is the optimum number for La Crosse?

"What is the value of having additional paramedics as the service volume increases?" Nesse asked. "What is the right number for a city this size, and what is the right number as the ambulance service increases?"

The proposal also calls for the creation of multi-jurisdictional governing board, made up of local elected officials and representatives from the medical clinics to oversee the emergency medical service.

Nesse suggested that the governing board be set up first. Then it should spend its time getting the information needed for a decision.

Whether the decision is made by local elected officials or by referendum as some people suggested Wednesday, objective information is essential to that process.

Comments »

tower wrote on Aug 13, 2008 2:15 PM:

" My Turn, what are you rambling about? In a battle of wits you come half armed. There is more to a system information then only response times. Answer the rest of the questions. You can't because you don't know what you are talking about. At least the paramedics on this site have knowledge of what they are talking about. Go take your meds now and be a good little boy. "

Insightful1 wrote on Aug 11, 2008 4:07 AM:

" Tower - the response time data is posted on the Tri-State web site under "performance indicators". All other data can be provided very easily if you'd like, just ask. Interestingly, FD never posted response time data until Tri-State started it 18 months ago! "

dfib wrote on Aug 10, 2008 9:44 PM:

" Tower- I would suggest you contact Mr Matt Zavadsky from TSA and ask for some information. I'd bet he'd be willing to accommodate you. "

Myturn wrote on Aug 10, 2008 9:17 PM:

" Sorry, 'Tower' has stuck his foot in the bucket. "

Myturn wrote on Aug 10, 2008 9:16 PM:

" Reading the old thread from this weekend it seems has indeed stuck his foot in the bucket. You are an 'insider' or at the very least a political pal. Doyle, the 'Slam Dunk' Mayor, and those who follow them have now been slowed down on 'fast tracking' this Plan. Reflected on the Tribunes Editorial that was squeezed out by a seldom seen collective pool of integrity over at the Paper. It could possibly be the death nail for yet another 'emergency' bit of business at City Council. Giving outside the loop onlookers time to gather their own statistics, and most importantly scrutinize what we have been privy one sidedly to already. The brake lever seems to have been pulled, Thank Goodness, it is how our System is supposed to work. Not gathering the needed papers and running down the Council aisles for vote. "

Myturn wrote on Aug 10, 2008 8:29 PM:

" Even the Tribune has had to fold on this one, and Editorialize a need to at least pull on the reins. Given a normal time to digest the 'Plan', and hear ALL of the sides and numbers would be the just thing to do. Given even short breathing room taxpayers may expect alternative numbers and data coming soon. Very soon! "

Myturn wrote on Aug 10, 2008 8:24 PM:

" A scrutiny of numbers, others areas, etc should be undertaken. If taxpayers and other concerned citizens ar given a chance to do so. As it appears our height challenged Mayor is coming down the lane to be only hoisted high by his Council minions to slam through yet another piece of City business without scrutiny. "

Myturn wrote on Aug 10, 2008 8:24 PM:

" The 'Slam Dunk' Mayor will attempt to do just exactly that, in a City Council introduction and short period to run it through. The Mayor stepped in it at last weeks WIZM interview. When asked who gathered his power point numbers? and How can we obtain a worksheet derived to arrive at them? His answer was, "The numbers have been determined by Chief Cleveland and the Fire Department and have been determined by studying other Fire based Systems around the State of WI. Could we have a better example of NO expertise, and very possibly Cherry picking? Our Financial Department at City is in 'shambles', reflected by the many stacks of papers in the Directors office, and inability to answer simple bookkeeping questions when asked. "

Myturn wrote on Aug 10, 2008 8:12 PM:

" It seems to me that Mr. Tower is a 'Plant' in a controversy to sway public opinion. Careful not to be blatantly branded with obtuse statements, yet always present subliminally pushing in a direction. Slowly you may watch him head toward the ultimate 'last stand' on this topic, and their side, 'FEAR'. Encompassed in 'response times', response time that nobody has had a problem with until the Slam Dunk Mayor made promises and concocted this ill conceived plan to enter the ambulance business with our taxpayer money. "

tower wrote on Aug 10, 2008 2:04 PM:

" I would agree but I wasn't necessarily talking about the financial only. How about run times, receiving hospital, type of run (trauma or not), transport time, city vs county response times, ALS vs BLS runs, etc. I simple don't see that happening without message of the numbers. I know those numbers are always put out there in raw data. There are more items to look at then just money. "

Insightful1 wrote on Aug 10, 2008 1:50 PM:

" I've heard that the CPA who spoke at the hearing took Matt up on his offer to review Tri-State's numbers. He went to Tri-State last week and reviewed the "raw data" and Tri-State even voluntarily gave him the raw financial data to take with him to review further - that seems pretty transparent to me. "

dfib wrote on Aug 10, 2008 11:43 AM:

" Does anyone know of another area that uses as similar board that we could look to for a model?

Tower- Perfect point about the commission having the ability to gather "raw" data. That would be a beautiful "transparent" change!

I would really like to see some "hard", justified numbers from both sides prior to any decision, rather than some figures thrown up on a power point presentation with no justification behind them. "

tower wrote on Aug 10, 2008 10:44 AM:

" I agree with Insight. Set the board up as was proposed. I didn't see TSA or GL object many years ago when the County Board looked into the services then. What they seem to be saying is Government stay out unless you are on our side.

I also think any commission should be set up to get information in raw form so it can not be managed. I don't think GL/TSA or the FD are telling it truthfully.

Only part I didn't like of the piece was we should lay off GL because they are the "biggest" taxpayer. How is a non profit a taxpayer and why should we care how big they are? Do we care about the taxes anyone else pays in the business world? How about Trane, or City Brewery. "

Common Sense wrote on Aug 10, 2008 9:05 AM:

" Has there been a problem with Tri-State? Have they been slow to respond? Has anyone suffered unduly because Tri-State handled a situation poorly? How many complaints have there been about Tri-State's service? Exactly WHY do city officials think they need to do this, and why have we heard so little about the reason? If Tri-State goes out of business because of this, where does that leave everyone else who lives outside of La Crosse? "

Insightful1 wrote on Aug 10, 2008 6:39 AM:

" The Editorial Board is correct - let the appropriately selected EMS Commission sift through all the information and decide. I trust that the proper balance of elected officials from all around the county, healthcare experts and doctors can make the right decision. Why would the City NOT want to let regional elected officials, healthcare experts and doctors make the decision? HmMMM? "