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Fire Department Costs to Factor in Ambulance Debate

Posted: July 30, 2008 04:12 PM CDT

Updated: July 30, 2008 04:41 PM CDT

By Reid Magney | WKBT.com

In addition to having one of the highest tax rates in Wisconsin, the city of La Crosse also has one of the state's most expensive fire departments, say taxpayer watchdogs.

Issues of fire department staffing levels will be a big part of the debate over whether the city of La Crosse's Fire Department should start an ambulance service, which would compete with Tri-State Ambulance, owned by Gundersen Lutheran Healthcare.

"No matter how you slice it, when you look at municipal spending in career fire departments, La Crosse is near or at the top," said Todd Berry, president of the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. That goes for staffing or per-capita spending, he said.

"The obvious question for policy-makers is, do we find something else for these people to do, or do we adjust staffing to levels that are more typical around the state?" Berry said.

It's still unclear exactly what the city is proposing. Fire Chief Gregg Cleveland has been studying the issue for years, but the La Crosse Common Council hasn't seen many details, said Council Member Andrea Richmond. "There hasn't been information enough about the costs," Richmond said. No resolutions have been introduced to the council, she said.

When something is introduced, Richmond said she wants to see lots of public meetings.

Word is that the city would budget money in 2009 to begin training firefighters, then start buying ambulances in 2010.

The city could generate revenue by billing patients for ambulance rides to local hospitals, though Matt Zavadsky of Tri-State points out that many of the services Tri-State bills to patients are not paid or collectible.

Figures on [Tri-State's Web](#) site indicate that in March 2008, the service had a 48 percent collection rate, meaning more than half of services billed were not paid for. That month, Tri-State had net revenue of \$369,456, compared to total expenses of \$351,688.

Zavadsky said Tri-State "will not exit the ambulance business in the city of La Crosse even if the city enters it. We will compete in a manner that does not compromise the quality of Tri-State's service."

La Crosse County Board Chair Steve Doyle said Wednesday, "Nobody is envisioning the city taking over ambulance service and forcing out Tri-State. They're looking at some mechanism for integration."

La Crosse County began playing mediator between the city and Tri-State more than a year ago, and all sides had agreed to a media blackout on details of the negotiations, in hopes of reaching an agreement. Tri-State broke the silence this week in meetings with local news organizations. City and county leaders will meet privately on Friday to decide how to respond.

The county became involved because of concerns among suburban and rural officials that a city-only ambulance service would negatively impact Tri-State's financial ability to continue serving the area. But it now appears the city and county are closer to being on the same page than the city and Tri-State.

How the city would make enough money to pay for the new service without taking all the calls isn't known.

What is known is that La Crosse has more firefighters per capita than most of the 35 Wisconsin cities that have what is known as "career" fire departments. La Crosse Fire Department has 97 staff members, which is 1.9 firefighters for every 1,000 residents, and spends \$190 per person on fire services (not including ambulance), according to 2006 figures from the Wisconsin Taxpayer's Alliance.

La Crosse is third behind Wauwatosa and Rhinelander in staff per 1,000 residents, and third in spending per person, behind Wauwatosa and Beloit.

The state average for fire staffing is 1.3 firefighters per 1,000 residents, and about \$150 per person, according to the Taxpayers Alliance.

See table below for details.



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