

**FRANKLIN COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
PUBLIC HEARING – AMBULANCE SERVICE
FRANKLIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE ANNEX
OCTOBER 5, 2010
5:00 PM**

MINUTES

Commissioners Present: Joseph Parrish – Chairman, Noah Lockley – Vice Chairman, Pinki Jackel, Cheryl Sanders, Bevin Putnal

Others Present: Marcia Johnson – Clerk of Court, Alan Pierce – Director of Administrative Services, Michael Shuler – County Attorney, Penny Sutton – Deputy Clerk

Call to Order 5:05 PM

Chairman Parrish called the public hearing to order.

Mr. Paul Marxsen, Chairman of the Hospital Finance Committee, commended the Board on their efforts to improve the County's health care over the recent years. He gave an update on the actions of the County Commission and the Hospital Board to improve the County's health care including the financial reporting, the construction of the Urgent Health Care center in Carrabelle, the partnership with TMH, the loan application to USDA for a new hospital, and other matters. He distributed a handout which provided specific information on the current and proposed additional cost of ambulance service in the County. He stated that it would cost the County \$80,592 to fund a BLS ambulance for an additional 20 weekends but if the County wanted to fund 2 fulltime ALS ambulances and a BLS ambulance for 30 weekends it would cost \$505,592.

Commissioner Sanders and Mr. Marxsen discussed how he determined the cost and the coverage time in his report. She also expressed concerns of residents having to use and pay for air ambulances because there are no County ambulances available, so that is why she thinks a third ambulance is needed.

Mr. Marxsen explained to Commissioner Sanders that because the proposal submitted from Lifeguard was not specific as to how many hours it would provide ambulance service for the proposed amount, he was unable to make his numbers comparable to Lifeguard.

Commissioner Sanders stated that she would like additional information on what is spent and received by the hospital for the ambulance service.

Commissioner Putnal stated that besides the third ambulance, a transport van is needed which is less expensive to operate and would keep all of the ambulances available for emergencies. Mr. Pierce explained that the Hospital does have a transport van that is used for transports but because there aren't enough transports and it is less expensive to operate it is also used to respond to emergencies. He also stated that the County owns six ambulances and only four of those are road ready.

Commissioner Sanders asked why the first ambulance cannot be moved to a central location when the other is outside the County on a transport run. She said we need to find a common sense solution to providing adequate ambulance service for the residents of the County.

Mr. Chuck Colvert, the Hospital CEO, stated that he has already talked to the School Board who has agreed to move an ambulance to the school in Eastpoint, which is a central location, when the other is on a transport run outside the County.

Commissioner Lockley asked if there were enough local paramedics that the hospital could start an "on call" system.

Mr. Colvert stated that at the present time there are not enough local paramedics to start an on call system but he further explained that the hospital has started a foundation that is offering scholarships to local residents who are interested in becoming a certified EMT.

Commissioner Lockley and Mr. Colvert discussed the Hospital adding a third ambulance in the County.

Commissioner Jackel asked Mr. Colvert how much of the \$425,000 subsidy is used for the two fulltime ALS ambulances.

Mr. Colvert explained that the total cost for the two ALS ambulances is more than the \$425,000 subsidy.

Commissioner Putnal explained that the Board needs to know how much it currently costs the hospital for the third part time ambulance.

Commissioner Jackel asked Mr. Colvert to explain how he arrived at the amount for the two full-time and the one part-time ambulance. She offered a possible explanation based on the available information.

Mr. Colvert explained that the figures are based on the amount and the cost of each shift that would be needed to cover the additional ambulance service along with what would be collected from the insurance companies.

Commissioner Jackel stated that based on the information if two ALS and 1 part time BLS costs \$425,000 then funding another full time ambulance shouldn't cost that much more.

Mr. Colvert stated that the gross amount to provide the current ambulance service is over \$700,000.

Board discussed options for adding a third full time ambulance.

Commissioner Jackel asked what it would cost to add a third full time ALS ambulance.

Mr. Colvert asked if adding the third ambulance would add any revenue to the ambulance service.

Board discussed some of the scenarios where a third ambulance is necessary.

Mr. Colvert explained to the Board that there is only one paramedic that lives in the County, all others are from neighboring counties, so it makes it difficult to add another ambulance. He also explained that the County is averaging about four helicopter life flights per month. Commissioner Sanders stated that the problem is when life flight service is used because there is not an ambulance in the County.

Chairman Parrish asked if life flight service is being used unnecessarily, especially when it is not a life threatening service.

Commissioner Sanders explained a situation of a broken hip where life flight was used because there wasn't an ambulance available.

Mr. Colvert explained that the only paramedic that lives in the County lives in Lanark Village. He stated that it takes four months to be certified as an EMT and an additional year and a half to be certified as a paramedic.

Commissioner Jackel asked if we could use our partnership with TMH to assist us with ambulance service.

Mr. Colvert stated that Leon County runs their ambulance service not TMH.

Mr. Colvert stated that GCCC needs a minimum of twelve people to offer a class.

Commissioner Jackel and Mr. Colvert discussed improving the management of the ambulance service.

Commissioner Jackel asked how flexible will the hospital be with dates and times regarding the part time ambulance.

Board and Mr. Colvert discussed the total amount of service hours that was being proposed by the Hospital Board for a third ambulance which could be used as needed.

Mr. Colvert explained what it cost to run both a BLS and an ALS ambulance yearly.

Mr. Jason Kimbrell, of Lifeguard Ambulance Service, stated that Lifeguard wants to be part of the community and will work with the hospital as best as they can. He also recommends that if the County wants to provide the best possible ambulance service that a professional company is hired to provide this service. He stated some of the staff currently employed by Lifeguard and some of the other counties that they partner with and provide service to. He explained that after analyzing the information provided by the hospital, it will take more than a third ambulance to solve some of the problems in the County.

Commissioner Putnal and Mr. Kimbrell discussed Lifeguard's procedures if Franklin County would ever have a catastrophic accident.

Mr. Kimbrell stated that Lifeguard is asking for a subsidy of \$515,000 and explained what ambulance service would be provided for this subsidy.

Commissioner Jackel asked if Lifeguard is planning to keep the current staff.

Mr. Kimbrell said if the current employees pass the appropriate drug test and are a fit for the company they will be Lifeguard employees.

Commissioner Lockley asked if the current salaries would be paid.

Mr. Kimbrell said that Lifeguard would pay current market rate, and would pay incentives for experience and other reasons. He further explained why he thought the paramedics were currently being overpaid.

Board discussed pay rate for EMTs further.

Recess 6:22 PM

Chairman Parrish called for a recess.

Reconvene 6:35 PM

Chairman Parrish reconvened the meeting and continued to hear public comments.

Commissioner Sanders asked Mr. Kimbrell of Lifeguard, what would be their protocol if their ambulances would have to leave the County for any reason.

Mr. Kimbrell stated that mutual-aid with neighboring counties would be utilized.

Board discussed the pros and cons to an ambulance mutual aid agreement.

Jay Abbott, St. George Island Fire Chief, stated that a third ambulance is needed because both ambulances are outside of the County more often than before.

Commissioner Jackel asked what has created the problem of both ambulances being out of the County so often.

Chief Abbott explained that a combination of things such as more car wrecks, aging residents, more strokes and heart attacks are causing the ambulance availability problems.

Chief Abbott agreed with Commissioner Jackel that an increase in population on St. George Island certain times of the year has created an increase in ambulance calls and was glad that the Board agreed to fund that part time ambulance on the Island.

Commissioner Putnal stated that Life Flight has helped but is very expensive.

Chief Abbot commented on the benefits of Life Flight.

Ginger Creamer, a first responder and Sheriff Deputy, stated that there is already a mutual aid agreement with Wakulla and Gulf County. She stated that Life Flight is usually requested by patients, it isn't automatic, but it isn't here within ten minutes and sometimes it isn't even available for different reasons. She also stated that paramedics and first responders are very courteous and caring people. She concluded by saying that you can never have enough ambulances.

Joe Cordell, of Alligator Point, stated that ambulances should be stationed closer to the Alligator Point community. He thinks that Lifeguard will provide the expertise that the hospital doesn't have to improve the ambulance service in the County. Mr. Cordell also liked the idea of the roving ambulance supervisor.

Allan Feifer, of the Alligator Point Taxing Association, thanked all first responders and EMTs for what they do. He stated that the wait for an ambulance on Alligator Point has been typically forty minutes or more. Mr. Feifer discussed incidents that have occurred on Alligator Point where the wait for ambulances were at least an hour or more. He said that Franklin County is not fulfilling their legal obligation to provide adequate ambulance service to the Alligator Point area. He wasn't here to recommend one ambulance service over the other but would like to know exact costs for Weems to operate the ambulance service. He asked if it is it a good idea for hospital to run ambulance service and stated that Weems is missing out on runs because

many people on the eastern end uses Wakulla ambulance service or Life Flight. Mr. Feifer asked the Board to make a decisive swift decision for the County's residents, especially those in Alligator Point.

Mr. O Brown of Alligator Point stated that there were three incidents when he needed ambulance service but response was delayed.

George Pruett, Eastpoint Fire Chief, stated that all firefighters are in agreement that a third ambulance is needed but he isn't necessarily in favor of hiring a for profit company because of past experiences with other outside companies. He is very proud of the current personnel that provides this service now, but agrees that improvement is needed with management. Commissioner Jackel asked if he has seen an increase with calls. Chief Pruett stated that even though it isn't consistent, there are more calls. He commented on the mutual agreement with other counties and the use of Life Flight.

Susan Walker of Alligator Point discussed her recent experience with ambulance service. She stated that when she called for an ambulance, both of the ambulances were out of the County so her sister was transported to TMH by a Wakulla ambulance. She later found out that one of the Franklin County ambulance crews had stopped in Wakulla for lunch. She asked for improvement to the service for Alligator Point residents.

Larry Holland, Lifeguard's Air Ambulance Program Director, thanked the Board for the opportunity for Lifeguard to be part of these discussions. He stated that Lifeguard would like the opportunity to provide ambulance service to the County. He also discussed the appropriate use of Life Flight and Lifeguard's philosophy on care of patients.

Debbie Brett, of Alligator Point, discussed calls she has made for ambulance service and it took either over an hour or wasn't available at all. She stated that care is good but more ambulances are needed so that there are better response times.

Steve Fling, Alligator Point Fire Chief, stated that the core problem is the calls to the nursing homes in the County, and better management of the current ambulance service is needed. Chairman Parrish asked if the Board stationed an ambulance in Alligator Point, are there any EMTs or Paramedics that are willing to be on call to respond to emergencies. Chief Fling stated that there are good first responders but the lack of personnel is a problem for responding to calls. Chairman Parrish stated that it is his preference to have an ambulance stationed in Alligator Point, especially because it is the furthest point in the County. He also hoped that once the Urgent Care Center in Carrabelle is opened, it would alleviate some of the transports. The Chairman stated that it takes a special person to become a paramedic or an EMT, but was glad that those who are willing will have the opportunity to be certified.

Commissioner Sanders asked Mr. Fling if he would "come out of retirement" as an EMT if the County stationed an ambulance in Alligator Point.

Mr. Fling stated that it is something he might consider.

Commissioner Sanders stated that staffing this ambulance while stationed in Alligator Point is something she also wanted.

Mr. Fling stated that dedicating a van type ambulance for transport from the nursing home would solve a lot of the problems.

Mr. Josh Wagner, a licensed EMT, stated that he lives in the County and has applied with Weems since May but has been told that there are no available positions.

Commissioner Jackel and Mr. Wagner discussed his qualifications.

Chairman Parrish hoped that there would be available positions since the County was planning on adding an additional ambulance.

Tammie Hardy, owner and operator of Harbor Breeze and a RN, stated that some of the information that was circulated regarding how often her facility and the nursing home called the ambulance is incorrect and misleading. She stated that it could be inferred that there were 720 calls per year between her facility and the nursing home but over the last two years her facility has only called 63 calls. If checked, there have only been 62 calls this year between her facility and the nursing home. She agrees that there is room for improvement, but asked the Commission to get the facts, not listen to opinions, when making a decision on the ambulance service for the County. She suggested getting accurate information from the Sheriff's dispatch office.

Hal McCord, of Alligator Point, stated that his wife is a 1st responder and while monitoring her radio he thinks that the ambulance makes at least 3 – 7 runs a day.

Commissioner Putnal asked Mr. Colvert if a third ambulance would reduce the overtime currently being paid.

Mr. Colvert stated that a third ambulance would increase overtime because it would require additional staff. To reduce the overtime more EMTs and Paramedics would have to be on staff.

Commissioner Sanders asked if we could add 1 BLS ambulance and staff it with 2 EMTs.

Chairman Parrish stated that this BLS ambulance could be used for transports from the nursing home which would allow the ALS ambulances to remain in the County.

Commissioner Jackel asked Mr. Colvert where the additional funding, beside the County subsidy, comes from to support the ambulance service.

Mr. Colvert stated additional funding is received from patient billing and insurance. He stated that there has been a shortfall recently so additional funding was requested from the County. Commissioner Jackel asked Mr. Colvert if he wants to continue to run the ambulance service, especially since he has stated, on a few occasions, that he was not an expert on managing an ambulance service.

Mr. Colvert agreed but he isn't an expert on ambulance service but there are a lot of people in the County that thinks Weems is doing a very good job with the ambulance service.

Chairman Parrish agreed that Weems is doing a great job with the service that is provided as there has been no complaint regarding the care that is being given, only about expanding the ambulance service throughout the County.

Commissioner Sanders stated that she wanted to make sure the County is able to provide adequate ambulance service and liked the Chairman's idea of putting a BLS ambulance online staffed with two EMTs.

Commissioner Jackel stated that the mindset she had coming to the meeting was somewhat different after hearing all the comments and information that was presented today. She stated that it is hard trying to please everyone, especially as the Board goes thru the process of trying to find solutions to problems, which could create more problems. She thanked all involved with providing health care to residents and visitors alike. The Commissioner stated that it is a challenge to decide if Weems should continue to manage the ambulance service or should the County engage a for-profit company like Lifeguard. She also mentioned that not having adequate trained and certified personnel in the County creates additional hardships especially with overtime and funding. Even though she doesn't have all the information and there is room for improvement, she agrees that Weems is doing a great job with the ambulance service.

Board discussed adding the third ambulance, funding sources for this ambulance, and completing the advisory committee that will assist the Board with improving ambulance service in the County.

Betty Cummings stated that she would like the Board to address the no subsidy in 10 years guarantee that Lifeguard was proposing.

Mr. Kimbrell, of Lifeguard, stated that Lifeguard will roll back any profit over 5% to the County and plans to decrease the County's subsidy every year and hopefully it would be a zero subsidy at some point, but he cannot guarantee it at this time.

Commissioner Jackel asked why the funding for the third ambulance was coming out of the reserve for contingency account instead of the health care surtax account. Board discussed this matter.

Commissioner Lockley stated that the Board should allow Weems to continue to manage the ambulance service.

Commissioner Jackel asked for the current balance in the reserve for contingency account. Mrs. Johnson stated that there is currently \$850,000 in the reserve for contingency account. Commissioner Sanders asked if any of the Constitutional officers returned unspent funds to the Board. Mrs. Johnson said no funds have been returned as yet.

Commissioner Jackel again asked why the funding for the third ambulance would not come out of the health care surtax account.

Recess

Chairman Parrish called for a recess.

Reconvene

Chairman Parrish reconvened the meeting.

Board discussed who will manage the ambulance service and how much and from which account the County will fund a third ambulance.

Commissioner Sanders stated that if the ambulance service remains with Weems there has to be improvement to the management.

Motion by Sanders, seconded by Lockley, to complete the process of establishing the emergency services advisory committee who will make recommendations to the Board, at the October 19 meeting, on improving the ambulance service in the County, adding a third ambulance which will be a BLS and staffed by 2 EMTs, will be funded from the Reserve for Contingencies in the amount of \$80,592, and will continue to be managed by Weems Hospital, but allow the Hospital Board to use Lifeguard as a consultant; 5-0.

Adjourn

Chairman Parrish adjourned the meeting.

Noah Lockley Jr., Chairman - FCBOCC

Attest:

Marcia M. Johnson, Clerk of Courts