

Forks splits its services

Suburban EMS takes over calls from troubled Forks EMS

Friday, July 18, 2008

by tony nauroth

The Express-Times

FORKS TWP. | Township supervisors decided Thursday night to make Suburban Emergency Medical Services the sole responder to advanced life-support calls and leave basic life-support calls to Forks EMS.

Forks EMS officials say the decision will gut the revenues for the struggling ambulance company.

It hit Forks EMS members at the meeting with a sense of finality, noting that this might as well be the last nail in the coffin for a medical service that has existed since 1972 but which now faces insurmountable debt -- perhaps almost half a million dollars total, according to numbers used by the supervisors.

Just moments before the supervisors made their decision, and after back-and-forth wrangling over financial numbers, Bill Keifer, president of Forks Township EMS, said in frustration, "You make your decision. We'll live with it. ... I'll be very blunt. If we split the service, Forks EMS will close."

Despite 111 residents' signatures gathered on petitions circulated by Forks EMS members calling for more time to fix their money problems, the board voted 4-0 to split the duties, meaning Forks EMS would have fewer calls to bill.

Under the prior arrangement, Forks would accompany Palmer Township-based Suburban EMS on all advanced life-support calls. If the call were downgraded to a basic life-support call, Suburban would leave and Forks would handle the call.

Now only one emergency provider will respond to an emergency call, depending on the level of care needed.

Under the prior arrangement, Forks took care of all billing then repaid Suburban its share. The arrangement was crafted because insurance companies pay only one service -- the transporter.

However, Forks' looming debt prevented the company from reimbursing Suburban in a timely fashion, officials from both companies agree.

One concern voiced by the supervisors was that residents in need of EMS service could end up getting a bill. There was also a concern of which service was better able to provide the best care needed and which could respond quicker.

Forks EMS officials stressed Thursday night that they're working on it, but Supervisor Erik Chuss said, "Every time there's a disagreement, you end up in front of us. It's really a matter between two private entities."

Supervisors Chairman David Howell asked Suburban director Barry Albertson, "Do you think an agreement might be reached by this board's next meeting?"

Albertson shook his head and said, "My board of directors is not in a negotiating mood."

Howell, along with Supervisors Chuss, Donald Miller and Bonnie Nicholas, voted. Supervisor Robert Egolf was absent.

Staff writer Tony Nauroth can be reached at 610-759-4599 in Nazareth, 610-258-7171 in Easton, or tnauroth@express-times.com.