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Forks board would back emergency squad's return

Township told group that if it has a state-approved business plan, it would get support.

By Joe Nixon Of The Morning Call

The resurgence of the Forks Township Emergency Squad will have the backing of township supervisors as long as a business plan being developed by a new board of directors passes muster with the Eastern Pennsylvania EMS Council and the state.

While township supervisors said they would back the squad's return, if it eventually is recommended by the EMS Council, it was clear Monday at a special supervisors meeting that a return isn't imminent.

The Forks squad suspended operations July 18 amid reports of financial difficulties. A police investigation is ongoing into what township Police Chief Gregory Dorney has termed as the "handling of financial matters in the previous administration of the squad."

The squad's new board, most of them life members who have come back to resurrect the organization, had hoped to restart by Sept. 11 provided they got the township's support.

But on Monday, EMS Council Executive Director Everitt F. Binns told supervisors he is recommending to the state that the squad's license be suspended for now, but pledged to work with the new volunteers to see what can be worked out, be it basic life support service or advanced life support service.

"I'm applauding these people who came back as volunteers, who came back to try and fix this situation," Binns said after the meeting, adding he also commended Palmer Township-based Suburban EMS for stepping in to provide service in Forks and Stockertown.

Supervisors voted 4-0 to support the squad, provided it gets EMS Council recommendation. Supervisor Chairman David Hoff abstained because of a potential conflict. He explained his son is a part-time Suburban employee in Stroudsburg.

William Keifer Jr., the new squad board president, said there is about \$278,000 in debt, most of it long-term debt. He said the group is also working to get up to date on a Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency loan and expected a grant will achieve that goal. Keifer, of Tatamy, also said there were more than \$700,000 in outstanding billings from the past year, but said it's likely only about 15 percent of that will be collected. He said the squad has used revenue from recent billings to get current with salaries of employees laid off when Forks suspended operations.

Keifer and other board members told supervisors the volunteers who have returned want a quality organization. "Our commitment is to make it better," Keifer said.

"We will assist them in every way possible," Binns told supervisors, adding as part of its license, the squad has to show it's available at all times for basic- and advanced-life-support services. "I think Forks is on the right track with their reorganization, however, I will not make that recommendation until I see plans and finances and say that they can really prove what they say they were going to do."

He said the EMS Council will provide free technical assistance to the Forks volunteers to assist in the planning process. Keifer said he welcomed the help.

Binns said it could take 30-60 days to work out a plan for Forks, but said the end result could range from a recommendation for a return to full service to one that keeps the squad out of service.

Keifer said Forks and Suburban EMS are working out a plan for Forks squad subscriptions, due to expire Thursday. A joint subscription is a possibility.

Hoff acknowledged the current volunteers inherited a tough situation.

"By coming in, you've taken over that problem that occurred," he said.

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