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Forks EMS reimbursement clouded

Squad says it intends subscriber refunds; township offered to pay for residents' coverage.

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A pledge by now-defunct Forks Township Emergency Squad to repay all residents who purchased a subscription this year creates the possibility that some could receive double reimbursement at taxpayer expense.

Supervisors voted unanimously last week to tap a \$20,000 reserve fund to purchase Suburban EMS subscriptions for those residents who subscribed only to Forks EMS, with the understanding that the local squad would not issue refunds.

But Michael Keifer, operations manager for Forks EMS, said Monday the squad intended to return all subscription payments, meaning a small group of residents could receive both the refund and free Suburban coverage courtesy of taxpayers.

"I don't believe that residents would try to take advantage of the township," said supervisors Chairman C. David Howell.

Supervisor Erik Chuss, chairman of the public safety committee, said the township would delay purchasing new subscriptions for qualified residents until the board reconsidered the issue. Solicitor Karl Kline said the township had the right to deny buying coverage for Forks EMS subscribers, despite the approved motion, because the circumstances had changed.

"Mr. Chuss indicated he was told flat out by Forks EMS that they weren't going to give the money back," Kline said. "The board took action on the basis of that statement made by Forks EMS. If they've changed position, the township needs to re-evaluate its position."

At the board meeting Thursday, Chuss said he had spoken with a Forks EMS board member who said the squad would not refund residents and would not provide the township with a list of subscribers. Without the squad's cooperation, the supervisors decided the only way to credit Forks EMS subscribers was for the township to purchase equivalent coverage with Suburban.

Less than 100 residents would be affected by the decision, Chuss estimated, which would cost taxpayers \$5,000 at the most.

But Chuss said Monday that the Forks EMS board member, whom he declined to identify, had not spoken for the entire squad.

"Obviously, he didn't know what was going on and he spoke out of line," Chuss said.

The situation is yet another example of poor communication in the adversarial relationship between township officials and Forks EMS. Months of disagreement have caused anger and anxiety among many residents, who have demanded a simple solution to the EMS debacle.

Jim Farley, finance manager for the township, said no one had presented a canceled check requesting a credit following Thursday's meeting. Though he confirmed the supervisors' decision was on hold, he recommended people still hold on to their proof of payment.

"Just because Forks EMS says they'll refund people doesn't mean that they will, and we don't want our residents caught in the middle of that," Farley said. "There is a level of skepticism on my part."

Keifer said the squad would begin sending 57 unopened subscriptions back to residents this week. About 120 have already been opened and cashed, he said, and those residents would have to wait until the squad sells its building to receive repayments.

Forks EMS is close to finalizing a deal for the property, Keifer said, which would allow the squad to repay all debts and subscriptions.

"People need to understand the situation we're in right now," Keifer said. "Things take time."

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