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By Zachary K. Johnson  
Record Staff Writer  
February 09, 2011 12:00 AM

STOCKTON - Officials postponed extending an agreement with the ambulance provider for most of San Joaquin County after receiving requests from some communities, a fire chief and ambulance employees to hold off making a decision.

American Medical Response has been the exclusive ambulance provider for the greater Stockton, Tracy and Lodi areas for five years. The San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors was set to consider entering into a new agreement for another five years at its regular meeting Tuesday but decided to revisit the agreement again at its next meeting March 1.

"Take some more time. Gather some more info," said Norm Desautels, a paramedic in the Tracy area. He was one of a group of AMR employees at the meeting who brought up concerns, including a new fatigue policy in the agreement and the guaranteed minimum number of service hours carried forward from the old agreement.

Both the current and proposed agreements call for there to be at least 3,024 hours of ambulance service time per week. That's not enough to ensure safe and adequate responses to medical emergencies in the county, Desautels said.

Barry Elzig, general manager of American Medical Response in San Joaquin County, said the company was "absolutely" providing safe coverage for the county. "Those claims are false," he said. On average, the company provides more than 300 more unit hours per week than what the agreement calls for, he said.

Desautels said the fatigue policy has problems, too. It includes conditions that other ambulance crews in the county don't have to follow, and it wouldn't eliminate conditions that had caused incidents of crews sleeping through emergency calls in the past, he said.

Elzig said there have been a handful of such instances, and that the county was right in asking for a fatigue policy. "That's why we agreed."

A Tracy City Council member had a list of questions about the agreement, and an official from Mountain House wanted quicker response times for that community, said Supervisor Leroy Ornellas, whose district includes the southern part of the county.

However, a fire chief from his district recommended the agreement be approved as it stood, he said. Another fire chief, Gene Neely of the Lathrop-Manteca Fire District, came to the meeting to ask supervisors to postpone action on the proposal.

Contact reporter Zachary K. Johnson at (209) 546-8258 or zjohnson@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/johnsonblog.

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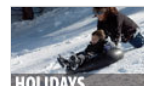
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