

S. Lake Tahoe wants out of ambulance business

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe Fire Department is on its way to returning to its primary focus – dealing with all things related to fire.

The City Council on Tuesday voted unanimously to make this happen. Lake Valley Fire is poised to be the provider of all ambulance services in El Dorado County on the South Shore.

The Cal-Tahoe Joint Powers Authority has been wrestling for some time with how to make the financials balance. One of the problems is the city and Lake Valley – the entities making up the JPA – entered a contract with the county to provide three ambulances and get reimbursed for the cost of two. The other issue is how inter facility transfers (IFTs) affect service and the bottom line.

The JPA is paid a flat fee for the IFTs. Depending on how far of a drive it is – could be the Bay Area – it's a losing proposition. It also means a depleted work force at the local stations. There were 640 IFTs in 2014, with 2015 on target to be higher than that.

"Our resource will be here all the time and not off the hill," SLT Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News* of the change. "We will have stability here."

His biggest desire is to have his charges focus on fires.

In 2000, before the city had ambulances, 12 people worked any given fire shift to handle the 2,000 annual calls. In 2001, the first year of city provided ambulance service, the on duty staff was at 14 for 2,200 calls. Today the staff is at 10, with 3,200 annual calls.

What will change is that a paramedic will be added to the engines at Stations 1 and 3, meaning three people will be on each rig. That unit is likely to be the first to arrive, with a Lake Valley staffed ambulance to follow. Lake Valley would staff two ambulances at Station 2 in the city.

The contract with the county necessitates a certain response time. Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris at the July 7 meeting said his people would meet the criteria of the contract. People are not expected to notice a change in the level of service.

The cost savings for Lake Valley comes from hiring emergency medical technicians for the ambulances instead of each one having two paramedics.

Between the two agencies there are 17 fire employees per shift. Employing EMTs will bring that number to 19.

Ultimately the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors will vote on the proposal. The JPA board will discuss the matter July 13. If all goes through, the city's representation on the board goes from two positions to one, with Lake Valley retaining two.

In other council action:

- City Attorney Tom Watson's rolling three-year contract was extended for another year. Changes to his compensation package are being worked on.

- The Tahoe Prosperity Center will give another presentation on July 21 in an attempt to get the council to pony up \$10,000. The majority of the council wants to see the nonprofit's budget and have a better understanding of how the money would be spent.

- Direction was given to start work on forming a recreation joint powers authority with Lake Tahoe Community

College and Lake Tahoe Unified School District.