

SLTFD not giving up ambulance duties

By Kathryn Reed

The South Lake Tahoe City Council on Monday took steps to reduce overtime in the fire department and ensure ambulances are staffed with appropriate medical personnel.

In July the council voted to turn over the ambulance service to Lake Valley Fire Protection District. South Lake Tahoe and Lake Valley fire departments make up what is called the Cal-Tahoe Joint Powers Authority. That entity operates the ambulance contract on the East Slope for El Dorado County

One reason South Lake Tahoe wanted out of the ambulance business is because of the interagency transfers. This takes employees out-of-pocket at times for an entire shift as they transport people to medical facilities outside the Tahoe basin. With a firefighter in that ambulance, it meant fewer people on duty to do that job. Plus, firefighters tend to make more money than an EMT. Lake Valley believed the compensation to make those runs was a profitable endeavor.

Lake Valley, based in Meyers, has dragged its feet to take on the responsibilities like it said it wanted to do and would do. This in turn has cost the city money to continue to staff the ambulances.

SLTFD Fire Chief Jeff Meston said he is still willing to negotiate a deal with Lake Valley, but for now he has to take care of his people, the city and be cognizant of his budget.

While Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris, board President Dave Huber and JPA Executive Director Ryan Wagoner all asked the council to delay the vote, they didn't explain why things were taking so long.

Huber wants the Lake Valley board and City Council to have a joint meeting. He did not say what might be accomplished if this were to happen. The council expressed zero interest in such a gathering.

Earlier this year Lake Valley firefighters had a vote of no confidence in their chief. However, the board continues to keep him on.

The City Council voted 4-0-1 on Dec. 7 to change the contract with the firefighters' association, which will then modify the staffing. Councilwoman Joann Conner abstained. At one time she was on the Cal-Tahoe JPA. She resigned from that post earlier this year.

With South Lake Tahoe removing firefighters from ambulances, it will save the city money and could mean less support for Lake Valley because no one in the ambulance can fight a fire.

Lake Valley Fire Protection District runs about five firefighters per shift, in large part relying on the free assistance of South Lake Tahoe, CalFire and the U.S. Forest Service. Those agencies all help each other out.

Seventy percent of the calls SLTFD goes on are medical emergencies. Firefighters respond to 30 to 40 calls a year. Most days there are 16 people on duty.

Going forward SLTFD ambulances will be staffed with paramedics and emergency medical technicians. Six EMTs will be starting Dec. 14.

The other change is three battalion chief positions are being resurrected after being eliminated in 2011. Testing for those jobs is being done now.

The other change for SLTFD is engines will now be staffed with three firefighters.

With an ambulance and an engine responding to most events, it

means five people instead of the current four will arrive.

The change in staffing in many ways is not new. It's what the city had in 2001 when the JPA agreement started, Meston said.

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In other action:

- On a 3-2 vote the council repealed the plastic bag ban affecting everyone but grocery stores. Councilmembers Hal Cole, whose idea it was revisit the issue, along with Tom Davis and Joann Conner voted in favor of the change.

- The council heard an update on the loop road from Tahoe Transportation District Executive Carl Hasty, with the same info that was available at **last week's open house**. There will be a public workshop in early 2016 where the public can ask questions and get answers.