

SLT intent on not being in ambulance business

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe has put El Dorado County and Lake Valley Fire Protection District on notice that it intends to get out of the ambulance service by April 15.

The multiyear contract between the three agencies allows for any entity to give a 30-day notice. The city did so on March 15.

The City Council took that unanimous action in closed session that Tuesday and the City Attorney's Office subsequently wrote the letter. (Councilman Hal Cole was not at that meeting.) The city, assuming it does get out of the contract, will have to forfeit a \$50,000 bond.

The city and Lake Valley in 2001 were first awarded the contract from the county. The fire agencies work together under the Cal-Tahoe Joint Powers Authority to provide ambulance service in their combined territories. Two members from each of their respective boards sit on the JPA.

At issue is the reimbursement the JPA gets from the county to operate the ambulance service. It's been an issue for years. The city contends it is spending \$700,000 a year in excess of what it is reimbursed.

Both fire agencies want 100 percent reimbursement and are frustrated that more than \$2 million is sitting in a county controlled fund for the JPA. The money comes from the assessment property owners pay and ambulance fees that are collected via the JPA.

County officials contend there is no way that money can be

released because of the contract that is in place. To do so could potentially result in a lawsuit from one of the bidders because it is a fixed priced contract.

“We have the fund balance for unanticipated expenses,” Creighton Avila, CAO spokesman, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Also paid out of that are things like billing and contracts. There could be any number of emergencies out there. That is what the fund balance is there for.”

What no one at the city – elected or staff – could explain is why in 2015 the JPA agreed to extend the contract three years, so now it expires in 2019. At least one city councilmember would have had to say yes to it. Councilmembers Tom Davis and JoAnn Conner were the city’s reps at the time of the decision. Now the JPA has Davis and Mayor Wendy David as members. Davis did not return a phone call. At no time did the council as a whole give direction to JPA members Davis and Conner to extend the contract.

Lake Valley would gladly take over the ambulance service – which has been discussed in earnest since last summer.

“Yes, we want to take it over, but there is not enough revenue under the existing contract for staffing of all three ambulances,” Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The next JPA meeting is set for April 11. It’s possible an emergency one will be scheduled before then.

In a statement, the county Chief Administrator’s Office said, “The county is expressly concerned about the threat to public health and safety of residents and visitors to the South Lake Tahoe region should the city of South Lake Tahoe terminate its ambulance service contract, with the Cal-Tahoe JPA, without making adequate provisions to ensure that its action will not put ambulance service in the South Lake Tahoe region at risk.”

South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston told Lake Tahoe News, "There won't be any interruption to ambulance service. That is not good for anyone and we won't allow that to occur."

The county sent the city a letter on Tuesday. As of Thursday no one at the city had seen said letter. The city has not provided *LTN* with its letter.

The county in its letter says the JPA board per the contract would have to agree to the termination by the city.

The letter says, "The Cal-Tahoe JPA board members and member agencies should consider all of the consequences, financial and otherwise, that could result if the Cal-Tahoe JPA agreed to allow a member agency to terminate one of the subcontracts without making adequate provisions to ensure that ambulance service is not put at risk."

The letter goes on to say, "While the county remain open to discussing alternative proposals for operations after the expiration of the existing EMS agreement, please be on notice that the county intends to exercise and enforce its rights under the existing EMS agreement and to pursue any and all available remedies if there is an event of a default."