

Changes in South Shore ambulance service

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County is hedging its bets when it comes to whether the ambulance service on the South Shore will keep operating as of Friday. Supervisors on Tuesday will be asked to bring in another company to take over the service if the Tahoe group can't make it work by the end of the week.

"It's specifically for standby services and a safety net so to speak in the event the JPA is unable to provide the services," CAO Don Ashton told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The county per state law is required to provide ambulance services. El Dorado has a contract with the Cal-Tahoe Joint Powers Authority, which is comprised of South Lake Tahoe and Lake Valley fire departments. Two elected officials from the member agencies make up the Cal-Tahoe board, with Ryan Wagoner the executive director of the JPA.

The city and Lake Valley for years have been trying to come up with a different scenario either for fire services – there had been talk of a merger/acquisition; or ambulance staffing; and then the city threatened earlier this year to pull out of the JPA.

That threat prompted the county this spring to enter into a contract with Downey Brand LLP out of Sacramento as outside legal counsel. With the city staying in the JPA and a compromise being worked out, the threat of litigation by the county against the city and /or JPA is not imminent.

South Lake Tahoe initiated an emergency medical services-based service late last year, while Lake Valley continues to staff ambulances with firefighter-paramedics. Each believes their

way of doing business is a more cost-effective model and provides better service for residents.

A few weeks ago the board voted 3-1 (Dave Huber of Lake Valley was the dissenter) to have the JPA take on the city EMTs as employees. This is to be in effect as of July 1.

The reason to do so now is that those city employees are temps and if they are to work more than six months, they then become eligible for Public Employee Retirement System benefits. That would be another expense the city does not want to take on.

The JPA is not a PERS agency.

The 12 city ambulance workers are now in the process of reapplying for their jobs with Wagoner. They will receive similar pay, health benefits and a 401(k), Wagoner said. Three of them just graduated from the Lake Tahoe Fire Academy this weekend. Keeping them in Tahoe will give them a better chance to get hired on by one of the local agencies as a firefighter.

An on call list will be developed to help with busy times – like the upcoming Fourth of July period, and to deal with vacations, sick time and when people leave.

Wagoner is hiring a firm that will handle the payroll and human resources aspect of the job. An operations person will also be brought in. There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle to get this off the ground. He was given 30 days to do so, when a few months would be the norm. The lack of time is the JPA's fault because the city for months has been telling everyone what its plans were.

The Department of Motor Vehicles, workers comp, and a slew of state certificates are needed to make the transition. Some of this is just so a bank account can be opened.

Dave Olivo, who is the city's elected treasurer, is now treasurer of the JPA. He is not a voting member and does not

write the budget. Wagoner had the treasurer duties since he started in May 2014. State law dictates how the accounting and auditing oversight is to be handled.

Questions have been raised as to whether it is a conflict of interest for Olivo to represent the JPA when he works for one of the member agencies.

“I know (South Lake Tahoe City Attorney) Tom Watson was aware of this appointment because he was at the JPA meeting two weeks ago when the JPA board appointed Dave Olivo. This was actually suggested by (county Auditor-Controller) Joe Harn because Dave has experience,” Wagoner told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The JPA board meets this week to finalize everything. But just in case it doesn't, the county – assuming supervisors OK the contract Tuesday – will have Regional Emergency Medical Services Authority on board to take over – even if it's just for a short time. REMSA would come with its own equipment and workers.

As for the JPA vehicles, the city will allow the ambulances to remain at Station 2 through the end of the JPA contract with the county in August 2019.

Other items on the June 28 Board of Supervisors' agenda regarding the JPA include authorizing the purchase of an ambulance for \$160,000 and increasing the dispatch service fee to a maximum of \$66,000/year until the contract expires on Aug. 31, 2019.