Del Norte Triplicate

NEWS

Santa Barbara Supervisors Caught in Crossfire over Ambulance Contract

March 26, 2025

County Reportedly Contemplating Settlement That Would Give AMR Three-Year Contract Extension

Last week, the Santa Barbara County supervisors went behind closed doors to have a sober talk with themselves about their chances in the lawsuit brought against them by AMR, the private emergency response and ambulance company that's held a monopoly in Santa Barbara for 41 years.

Although nothing would be reported out that day — or since — the supervisors' choices hovered between the grim and grimmer. If they fought it out in the courtroom, they'd been told, they'd get clobbered. Given that the supervisors yanked a 10-year contract said to be worth $1 billion from AMR to give it to the county's own fire department instead, the price of defeat would be punishingly prohibitive.

Accordingly, the supervisors are reportedly contemplating a settlement that would give AMR a three-year contract extension.

Outside the County Administrative Building, a group of about 20 firefighters and elected officials — convened by the firefighters union — exhorted the supervisors to stand firm and not cave in. Anything more than a one-year extension, union chief Brian Hendez said, would be too much. The union and the fire chiefs had worked for more than five years, he argued, to secure a contract that all the supervisors — even the one who didn't vote for it — agree promises to put more ambulances on the streets and provide quicker response times, better service, and lower costs.

Hendez played a cell phone recording of a dispatch tape from a distraught Santa Maria resident wondering why it's taken AMR hours and hours to get his wife from her hospice and back home where she wanted to die. Three follow-up phone calls later, he said, and not one response.

Goleta City Councilmember James Kyriaco complained that AMR had met its contractually obligated response times only 82 percent of the time; the contract requires 90 percent compliance. Eighty-two percent, Kyriaco noted, qualified as only average, adding that Goleta residents deserve better than average.

The contract, one speaker argued, was a battle between corporate profits and public service. AMR, he noted, was headquartered in Colorado and was owned by a company in Texas that had recently been swallowed up by a hedge fund in New York.

Santa Barbara Mayor Randy Rowse spoke on behalf of the firefighters; when you need help, response time, he said, was the only thing that mattered.

The substantial political clout of the firefighters union is lost on no one working on the County Administration Building's Fourth Floor, where there's been grumbling about union pressure. By any reckoning, the supervisors moved heaven and earth to get the fire department the contract, even after the department's bid came up 300 points short compared to AMR's in the bidding process. AMR sued, charging that the supervisors—determined to eliminate AMR's decades-long monopoly — had only created a new monopoly, thus violating two state laws designed to protect the public from such monopolies.

Judge Donna Geck issued a blistering legal opinion siding with AMR. State Attorney General Rob Bonta filed a friend-of-the-court brief on AMR's behalf as well.

The supervisors are not ducking from shadows when citing their legal challenges. Where discussions are at between the supervisors and AMR is anybody's guess — likewise with what the supervisors will eventually do. If the matter is not resolved, however, it's scheduled to go to trial in November.

https://triplicate.com/news/1303bfd5-757a-44b8-a53a-321a6f252921 Printed November 23, 2026 · © Del Norte Triplicate