

Questions Loom Over Supervisors Decision to Seek Ambulance Bids

June 14, 2024



The North Coast Emergency Medical Services (NCEMS) held its quarterly meeting to correct the motion by the Board of Supervisors as to what agency is responsible for conducting a Request for Proposals and who is responsible for paying for the search seeking new bidders for 9-1-1 emergency medical for service in Del Norte. 1st District Supervisor Darrin Short attended the North Coast EMS meeting in Eureka and reported to his colleagues at the May 28 Board meeting a clarification was to correct the inaccuracy.

If the Board of Supervisors votes to proceed with the Competitive Bidding search, Del Norte County will be responsible to pay for the expenses that may run as high as \$150,000, according to NCEMS Director Larry Karstadt.

NCEMS will conduct a search for a qualified contractor to conduct the search, under NCEMS supervision, The Request for Proposal will invite potential bidders, including current provider Del Norte Ambulance.

The process has been clouded with many unanswered questions.

Has Del Norte Ambulance, the exclusive provider of 9-1-1 Ambulance service for almost four decades been an unsatisfactory provider? No, not according to a recent recognition by the Board of Supervisors.

Five weeks back, the Board recognized Emergency Services Medical Week and Del Norte Ambulance.

Accepting the recognition was the team from Del Norte Ambulance (DNAMB) founder and principal owner Ron Sandler addressed supervisors with an update on Del Norte Ambulance services.

Sandler acquired Del Norte Ambulance in 1985 and his company has served the community uninterrupted since the 70s.

Sandler utilized the opportunity to speak about DNAMB commitment to the community and shared a recap of 2023 accomplishments including a fleet of six fully equipped ambulances outfitted with state-of-the-art technology. Four of those fully-equipped vehicles are in service with on-duty crews, while two ambulances are kept in reserve during surge conditions. Five year partner Metro West has enabled Del Norte Ambulance to replace its fleet every three years at a cost of \$184,000 for each vehicle. At the open public speaker microphone, Sutter Coast Hospital, the Dept. of Health and Human Services Mental Health unit and other members of the community heaped glowing praise upon the Del Norte 9-1-1 Ambulance service. Did these accolades fall on deaf ears?

After the recognition was bestowed upon Del Norte Ambulance, including individual supervisors, one question was left unanswered:

Why is the Board seeking to circulate a Request for Proposal from other emergency medical and Ambulance providers?

It's a relevant question involving the opportunity to "grandfather" continuous service or relinquish that service in favor of seeking new emergency services. A lot of money is at stake. Those costs ultimately fall back on the Public. NCEMS of which Del Norte County is a member along with Lake and Humboldt counties, will be tasked to allocate a significant sum of funds to seek an RFP for new services. Sandler spoke with The Triplicate, "...If we were not providing the highest level of care, I could see the Board putting the EMS service up for an RFP but that's not the case and it's financially risky in doing so and not in the best interests of the community. Indeed, Sandler admitted no service is perfect, especially over 39 years of continuous service. Sandler continued, "There's always room for improvement but the question must be asked: Is a Request for Proposal the most prudent option?" Sandler touted Del Norte Ambulance and questioned why would supervisors bypass the grandfather clause, an option already utilized by the Humboldt Board of Supervisors in its practice of providing emergency medical services?

Last year, the Del Norte Board narrowly voted 3-2 to shop the market for a new EMS service.

The item raises more eyebrows in that DNAMB may certainly apply for the same service it currently provides. Finally, the Del Norte Supervisors would forever lose its flexibility in selecting the service due to its periodic seeking of services upon the expiration of each contract, according to Sandler.

The attorney for DNAMB sent a three page letter to the NCEMS Board advising "...NCEMS might request reimbursement of the costs of conducting a search for alternative emergency service and that would create a hardship for a relatively small provider, be unfair and may very well be illegal."

The Board would need a 4/5 super majority to bring the item back for discussion.

None of the above is happening in any short time period. Del Norte Ambulance continues to provide 9-1-1 service through June 30, 2027.