

Guest Column: Is an exclusive ambulance agreement right for Del Norte County?

September 4, 2022



Thirty-seven years ago, Ron Sandler assumed control of Del Norte Ambulance. As the community has grown and changed, so has Del Norte Ambulance in serving emergency service needs for the county. Transporting those in need for emergency and non-emergency incidents in a safe, secure manner is Del Norte Ambulance's goal.

It now seeks an exclusive agreement with Del Norte County, the sole 9-1-1 amenity for the public. Rich or poor, insured or not, if one needs the assistance, Del Norte Ambulance hopes to be the stand-alone, one and only choice, to provide the service. Is an exclusive operating agreement the right choice the County of Del Norte?

Sandler and Del Norte Ambulance delivered a report to the Board of Supervisors at its July 26 meeting outlining the company history, its partnership with minority interest Metro West, its expanded technology in

delivering paramedic services, its affiliation with Northcoast Emergency Medical Services and its request for exclusivity.

There are some in this highly professional emergency services community who may have a differing opinion on exclusivity. Supervisors Darrin Short and Valerie Starkey have been designated to gather the facts and report their findings to the full board at an upcoming yet to be announced date. The ultimate decision to grandfather in the amendment will rest solely on the shoulders of the board.

Northcoast EMS provided the three options for Board consideration.

- 1) Make no changes in its agreement.
- 2) Grant the exclusive operating agreement.
- 3) Open competitive bidding via a Request for Proposal (RFP) from other 9-1-1 first responders. Option 3 seems to be a costly one, about \$150,000. I don't see this as a viable choice. All of us can suggest better ways to allocate that six figure sum, rather than spending precious general fund dollars on a medical provider currently performing in a satisfactory manner and with a good track for nearly four decades.

Is Del Norte Ambulance perfect? NO! Is there room for Improvement by Del Norte Ambulance in delivering emergency services? Absolutely YES!

What are the issues and who's complaining?

The sheriff, the police and CHP have reported there are no issues with Del Norte Ambulance. Sutter Coast Hospital expressed its satisfaction with Del Norte Ambulance.

Is this feedback entirely candid? Always present is a general unwillingness to criticize colleague agencies. Reluctance to find fault with Del Norte Ambulance services is very much present in this latest request.

I served as the board's representative to the Northcoast EMS. Over those years, there were never any serious issues involving Del Norte Ambulance. Truth be told, Del Norte Ambulance has performed well, saved lives, and though not perfect, has been responsive to any mistakes or missteps occurring over these decades of service.

Those who've quietly shared other concerns are few but highly respectable and knowledgeable. Crescent Fire Protection District Chief Kevin Cary shares his vast experience and knowledge as a veteran paramedic. When a first responder receives an exclusive agreement to provide a service, unintended consequences may occur. Lackluster service may follow, and very often, it is a tedious and difficult process to break the monopoly and replace the provider. Chief Cary brings an extensive resume of larger community emergency service where competition thrives. The newly-appointed fire chief is reserving judgment on the Del Norte Ambulance exclusivity proposal at this time but declares his intent to work closely with all partners, including Del Norte Ambulance.

Other professionals recommend adding additional coverage to serve Rhode Island-sized Del Norte County. Currently, Del Norte Ambulance serves the community with two Advanced Life Support (paramedic on board) and a third ALS unit soon to be deployed, one Basic Life Support unit (non-emergency medical transportation) and three more units on standby but not staffed. The lack of qualified paramedics is critical. Critics feel two ALS units is deficient. I'd concur.

Conversely, Cal-Ore Ground Services serves Curry County, Oregon with five ALS paramedic-staffed units spread out geographically with one ambulance unit in Port Orford, one unit in Gold Beach and three units in Brookings. All service is 24/7. Curry County serves a population of about 24,000 compared to Del Norte's 27,000 plus.

Recruiting and hiring professionals is a not so easy a task these days. The COVID era has thrown a monkey wrench into hiring practices.

Most certainly, more coverage would be helpful, but it's costly. More coverage translates to several thousand dollars per year per unit.

Is the public prepared to dig into its pockets to support expanding Del Norte Ambulance?

Del Norte Ambulance averages between 12 and 18 calls, daily.

The county compensates Del Norte Ambulance \$2,500 per month for indigent services. Del Norte Ambulance provides up to 21 pro bono calls plus many modestly reimbursed and unrealistically low Medicare and Medi-Cal calls.

The board has now begun the long-overdue process of familiarizing itself with Del Norte Ambulance operations. Supervisors Starkey and Short will report factual data, specific not subjective, to the other supervisors.

Decisions must be made on how many paramedic-staffed units is both appropriate and realistic. Del Norte County is losing population yet has attracted a significant increase of individuals without home or resources.

This population is placing severe additional pressure on delivering emergency services, a burden on the beleaguered local taxpayer.

Critics of Del Norte Ambulance can easily render opinion but the economic reality of this service must be recognized.

Del Norte Ambulance has performed well and has earned an exclusive operating area designation with appropriate with a three to five year agreement and semi-annual reviews.

Bottom line: serve the patient and the public well. Let's award the exclusivity agreement and demand the third paramedic-on-board unit be part of the agreement. And do so expeditiously.

Roger Gitlin is a retired Del Norte County Supervisor.

