Ambulance subsidy rankles SLT officials

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe is tired of subsidizing ambulance service on the South Shore and is about to demand El Dorado County pay what it actually costs to run the program.

The bulk of the Feb. 3 City Council meeting centered on the 14-year-old Cal-Tahoe JPA which oversees the ambulance service that is provided by South Lake Tahoe and Lake Valley fire departments.

While the local agencies, with oversight by a board of directors, run the day-to-day operations, it is the responsibility of the county to provide residents with ambulance service. If the JPA were to disband, ambulance service would be solely the county's responsibility.

When the county went out for a bid in 2011 only the JPA made an offer. That contract expires in 2016, though the county has granted the JPA board's request to open the contract.



Ambulance service per law must be provided by El Dorado County. Photo/LTN

The fire departments operate three full-time and two reserve

ambulances. But the county is only paying for two vehicles.

The county has also drained the coffers by reimbursing the JPA for trips to other hospitals at a flat fee. Inter-facility transfers used to garner 93 percent of the cost for the JPA, plus mileage. At that time it was a big revenue stream.

Another financial obstacle is that when the benefit assessment district was formed the engineer's report left out condos and timeshares from having to pay the fee. Wording in the assessment says, "Each property shall be assessed in relation to the entire cost of the provided service." That isn't happening and the JPA board wants all parcels to pay their share.

The county also is not reimbursing the city for what it actually costs to run the dispatch center.

Fire Chief Jeff Meston told the council the JPA has been subsidizing the ambulance service for 13 years for a total of $13 million. Of that amount, $8.58 million came from the city's pocketbook and nearly $4.5 million from Lake Valley.

The council agreed to meet with Supervisor Sue Novasel, who represents Tahoe on the Board of Supervisors, to request an item be put on the supervisors' agenda regarding equitable compensation for the ambulance JPA. The vote was 4-0, with Councilwoman JoAnn Conner abstaining. She is on the JPA board and believes the council is usurping her authority.

Her council colleagues said as group they are a stronger voice than the JPA board, but are not trying to step on the JPA board's toes.

The JPA board is made up of two council members and two Lake Valley Fire board members.

Part of the problem in getting the county be fair is that the JPA board for years was totally dysfunctional. Ever since

North Tahoe Fire Protection District left the JPA in 2006, many votes have been 2-2, so progress was stalled. Slowly they have begun to play nice.

But still, South Tahoe wants a fifth board member, but Lake Valley says no. There has been talk of officials from Barton Health or CalStar being a fifth member or even increasing the board to seven to possibly function better.

It wasn’t until Meston came on board that the true operating costs and subsidizes made by the city and Lake Valley have come to light.

Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris was in the room for the entire discussion, but never left his seat in the front row.