

Ambulance

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During Tuesday's meeting, councilors discussed both the financial challenges and their desire to avoid layoffs in the fire department.

City and county exchange correspondence

State law does not require the county to contribute financially to the ambulance providers it chooses. City Manager Jonathan Cannon told councilors during their March 22 meeting that the city can't afford to continue to operate ambulances based on its financial situation.

Cannon wrote in a report to councilors that the difference between what the city bills for ambulance runs, and what it actually collects, could "approach a million dollars a year in the very near future."

The city has not historically broken even with ambulance billing, in large part because most of the patients the city bills are covered by either Medicare or Medicaid, and those federal programs pay only about 20% of the city's actual costs.

Councilors on Tuesday went over records showing that the gap between what the city spent for ambulance service and what it collected from bills ranged from \$587,000 to \$859,000 over the past five fiscal years. The projected difference for the current fiscal year is about \$581,000.

Baker County has budgeted a contribution to the city of \$100,000 for the current fiscal year, after paying the city \$99,000 over the previous three years.

On April 6, county commissioners voted to offer the city \$150,000 for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

That's \$20,000 more than the county had proposed this winter, in response to the city's proposed contract, which called for a county contribution of \$137,000.

County officials failed, however, to send that offer to the city prior to the City Council's March 22 meeting, at which councilors decided to set the Sept. 30, 2022, ultimatum for ending ambulance service.

During Tuesday's meeting, Councilor Jason Spriet



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Baker City Fire Department firefighter/paramedics David Van Dyke, left, and Patrick Foss in one of the department's ambulances on Tuesday, April 12, 2022.

asked Cannon whether the city would have accepted the \$130,000 offer — just \$7,000 less than the city had proposed — had the county actually sent the offer.

Cannon told Spriet that at that point the city wouldn't have had a reason not to accept the offer. Cannon noted, though, that if the city had done so, subsequent financial projections showing a larger loss in the ambulance service would have put the city in a "very difficult" position, having accepted a county offer that wasn't enough to meet the city's needs.

Council ponders financial challenges, effects on fire department

Alderson said he's worried that if the county has to replace the city fire department with a private ambulance company, the private firm's employees would have trouble finding housing given the costs and lack of supply.

Alderson pointed out that last fall the city was "fighting the governor" on a mandate that health care workers, including firefighter/paramedics,

be vaccinated against COVID-19, with a goal of keeping the fire department staff intact. Yet now the city is preparing to lay off half of those employees.

"If we can figure out where to get the money I want to push forward and keep these guys working," Alderson said.

Councilor Johnny Waggoner Sr. said he's concerned about how the loss of Baker City Fire Department ambulance service would affect emergency responders in rural parts of the county.

"I don't think anyone realizes all we're about to lose if we lose the Baker City ambulances," Waggoner said.

Cannon responded that the county is legally responsible to find a different ambulance provider if the city ends its service, and that he believes the county could find a quality private company to do the work.

Commissioners derived their current \$150,000 offer based on the city's estimates that its ambulance service shortfall will total about \$750,000 next fiscal year, and that ambulance runs outside the city limits account

Letter from Baker City firefighters union

Editor's note: Baker City Councilor Shane Alderson read this letter, submitted by the firefighters union, during the April 12 City Council meeting:

The decision to possibly end the transport comes at a tremendous risk and cost to the residents who have relied on the Baker City Firefighters for many years. The decision to end ambulance transport opens the area to outside influence for private, for-profit ambulance companies. They make money off of taking people to the hospital.

Private Ambulance Companies, specifically MetroWest and AMR Ambulance have a long history of taking over ambulance service areas in the name of profits. In Washington County, the Oregon Coast, Southern Oregon, Marion County, and attempts in Clackamas County, MetroWest will present themselves as the lowest price provider in the attempt to win the contract. Once the contract is secure, Metro will operate to maximize profits. They will promise on response standards, but constantly fail to meet those standards, seeking exemptions for not meeting contract stipulations. Metro will utilize the least number of ambulances possible with minimal staffing. There is no planning for spikes in call volume and will often force the public agencies to take fire apparatus out of service to staff ambulances. This lack of ambulances to meet demand will also cause firefighters to remain on scene longer and not available for additional fire and rescue responses.

After a few years, Metro will then begin to incrementally raise transport fees charged to patient's and insurance companies. So what started as the lowest cost provider, soon that provider becomes one of the highest costing providers. Often times, there is little the oversight agencies can do to control these costs.

The Baker City Firefighters have been able to meet the needs of our community. We've been able to do it as public workers and not a for profit system that prioritizes profits over patient care.

In shopping out this ambulance contract to a Portland based company, we will lose half of our dual role firefighters available for not only fighting structure fires to preserve life and property, but to perform vehicle extrication, mitigate hazardous materials dangers, perform public safety education, CPR classes, and engage in our community. We will lose a home grown professional service and revert back to a staffing model that was established in 1909 when fire response was by horse drawn cart.

I will leave you with this: is this the right decision for our community? Will this BENEFIT or HAMPER the safety of our citizens? If not resolved, is this drastic decrease in fire service what any of you would want for safety of your families and your domain?

I urge city council and county commissioners to work hard to come to an agreement that will maintain services without any decrease in service to our constituents in the short term, so then we can build a better system for the future benefit of citizens of Baker County and Baker City.

for about 20% of the total.

But Cannon said the city can't continue ambulance service if the county's contribution is based solely on an estimate of how many ambulance runs are outside the city.

He also told councilors that given recent increases in the number of ambulance calls, the city is nearing a "threshold" at which it might need to hire an additional three firefighter/paramedics to maintain service levels. That could increase the fire department's personnel costs by approximately \$300,000 to \$350,000.

He said that with a \$150,000 county contribution, the city, if it continued ambulance services after Sept. 30, likely would be in a similar situation in Jan-

uary 2023 and need to notify the county again that the city intended to discontinue ambulance service.

Councilor Joanna Dixon said that although the last thing she wants is for the city to lay off firefighters, "in all good conscience I cannot continue with these kinds of losses to the citizens of Baker. In essence we're going to bankrupt the city, and we can't do that."

In a report to councilors for Tuesday's meeting, Cannon wrote that the city is preparing to transition the fire department from its current status, responding to both fires and ambulance calls, to a "single role department" dealing only with fires.

The city would cut its fire-

fighting staff by about half, from 12 in the current budget (although two positions are vacant now) to six shift workers, along with a full-time assistant chief and a chief who would work three-quarters time.

Cannon wrote that on average, the department responds to 14 structure fires per year.

"Typically, occupants of buildings have already evacuated and therefore rescue operations are not frequent," Cannon wrote. "The remainder of calls the fire department responds to include fire alarms, fire inspections, and non-structure fires."

Casey Johnson, president of the local union chapter that represents city firefighters, said recently that he's concerned that with just two firefighters on duty per shift, situations could arise when firefighters would not be able to enter a burning building because they lacked a two-person backup crew as city policy requires.

Cannon also wrote in his report that he does not expect the city's Insurance Services Office rating — which some insurance companies use to determine homeowner insurance rates and whether to provide coverage — would drop by more than one level, from the current 3 to 4, and possibly would not change at all if the staffing cuts are made.

Cannon also told councilors that he has concerns about some aspects of the new ambulance service area ordinance that county commissioners are working on.

One of those is giving the county the authority to change the size of an ambulance service area.

"If the county so chose, this could be construed to say they could increase that area and then we would have to cover it for the same costs we're currently covering it," Cannon said.

He said he's also concerned about the possibility of the county being able to suspend or revoke the assignment of an ambulance provider after finding that the provider has willfully violated provisions of the service area plan.

"If they deem that we violated the provision of the plan, any state or federal law and regulation then they can come in and bring in another provider and we pay the bill. That gives me great concern," he said.



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