

## Ambulance

### Continued from A1

"The ordinance (billing practice) is not in the community's best interest at all," said La Pine Mayor Dan Richer. "It's being driven by money."

The city of 2,343 people doesn't have any jurisdiction over this issue, Richer said. The La Pine Rural Fire Protection District is governed by its own board, which passed the ordinance allowing the unusual billing practice in 2019.

The central issue is that the fire district provides ambulance service at a loss, said Jerry Hubbard, a fire district board member whose term expires in June, in an email response. As a way to cover the costs, the board of directors at the fire district approved an ordinance in 2019 that gave the fire chief approval to impose an ambulance transport fee and a non-emergency medical fee on 911 calls he deemed not life-threatening.

The policy was changed earlier this month by the fire district board to now charge health facilities for all ambulance transport, regardless of the reason.

### Suit filed

The fire district's actions prompted the La Pine Community Health Center and St. Charles Family Care Clinic in La Pine to file a lawsuit last year disputing more than \$350,000 in combined 911 initiated ambulance fees charged by the district to the clinics.

The two La Pine medical facilities allege the fire district's fee structure is illegal because it shifts the burden of payment from the patient that received the service to the entity that made the 911 call. The lawsuit also alleges the policy gives the fire district the authority to determine if an ambulance ride was medically necessary, an action that could contra-



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin file

**Medics from La Pine Rural Fire Protection District wheel a patient into the St. Charles Bend emergency room in 2011.**

dict medical professionals. The next court hearing is May 6, according to court records.

"This is an isolated situation," Bill Boos, Oregon Fire Chief Association second vice president. "This isn't something that other fire departments or districts are doing in Oregon. It won't affect anyone else."

In some areas, the ambulance service can bill the patient the balance after an insurer pays, but in communities with a high percentage of Medicaid patients, the federal program pays anywhere from 27% to 67% of the bill and the fire district or department has to accept that payment as paid in full.

The La Pine fire district, which has two ambulances, oversees a 117 square-mile area for fire protection services and 1,000 square miles for the ambulance service district, Hubbard said in an email.

The district's policy states a fee will be imposed directly to

the medical facility, health care facility, medical office, medical clinic or hospital for all ambulance transports for patients from their facility to another. The fire chief has the discretion to interpret and apply the policy, according to the district's policy.

Oregon law divides the state into ambulance service areas that are bid on and overseen by counties. In Deschutes County, the ambulance service area plan oversees the award of the contract to a district or department. Also under Oregon law, a patient can refuse to be transported by ambulance to an emergency department. It's a protection offered under the law for patients who don't have medical insurance coverage and would be responsible for the ambulance fee.

Because it's a 30-minute drive along U.S. Highway 97 to get to St. Charles Bend's emergency department, many folks in La Pine and the surrounding communities like Chemault

and Christmas Valley buy insurance to cover the cost of lifting or ambulance services, said Gawith who has lived in La Pine for 40 years.

Having access to medical care is important, Richer said, the La Pine mayor.

In 2020, St. Charles's La Pine clinic called 911 95 times requesting transport from its clinic to the hospital in Bend. In 2020, the La Pine Community Health Center called 911 on behalf of patients 35 times, according to Hubbard's email.

"Emergency medical service is an expense," Hubbard said in an email. "Due to the high volume of ambulance transports to St. Charles ER (1,046 in 2020) the district ambulances are replaced every 2 1/2 to 3 years costing \$250,000 each. The 2021 operating budget cannot afford to add additional firefighter/paramedics."

Letters of testimony But since 2020, the fees have been added up against the two health centers and caused a

controversy in the community that brought out more than 50 letters of testimony for and against the ordinance at a January public hearing.

"I need you to know I highly disagree with the actions that this (policy) has enlisted," Anita Clark wrote in her testimony. "I think that a doctor is the one to determine if emergency transportation is needed. I do not think that they would call for our services if they did not think that it was absolutely necessary."

Another who testified was Robin Lannan Adams, a retired internal medicine physician, who also launched a campaign for a seat on the fire district board.

"I first learned of this conflict between the ambulance and the medical clinics last year," Lannan Adams said in an interview recently. "I started attending the fire board meetings to get educated, and I was shocked by the decisions made. Patients need ambulance transport. They're not going by ambulance because they need a ride."

La Pine residents Mark and Colleen Donzelli said in an email that their experience in the medical field in San Francisco supports the fire district.

"We understand about the frequent flyer and the urgent care doctor not wanting to be sued so he passes the buck to the 911 service," said Colleen Donzelli in her written testimony.

"This county has grown and the county planners have not planned for this issue."

The Oregon Health Authority oversees and approves ambulance services and licenses ambulance agencies and vehicles, but it does not regulate billing practices, said Jonathan Modie, a health authority spokesman.

In 2020, the district transported 1,046 patients to St. Charles Bend's emergency de-

partment, according to Hubbard.

They are transported not just from clinics, but from homes and doctors' offices. Typically Medicare pays a flat fee for emergency and non-emergency ambulance services when the patient's medical condition is bad enough that any other method would endanger their health.

"The district has a policy that it will never leave the citizens of La Pine without fire, emergency medical service and rescue services," said Hubbard in an email. "Many times both ambulances are taking patients to St. Charles ER or returning to the district."

The district's practice concerns Oliver Tatom, a registered nurse supervisor at St. Charles Family Care and Intermediate Care in La Pine. Tatom, a former paramedic in Jefferson County, said he fears he is not getting the right care for his patients.

"I worry that if a patient is having a heart attack or stroke, I don't want them driving or being driven to a clinic or to an emergency department," Tatom said. "Patients with chest pains or difficulty breathing should activate 911 from their home or business for transport by ambulance under the care of a paramedic."

"Every minute counts with a heart attack," he said. "You don't want people getting in their car to drive to an emergency department in the midst of a medical emergency."

Last year, the clinic saw more than 7,000 patients and referred about 700 to the emergency department at St. Charles. Only 95 of them went by ambulance from the clinic, Tatom said.

"It's a big safety issue, and it does impact patient safety," Lannan Adams said.

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## Wildfires

### Continued from A1

Fire officials categorize fuels by size and how long it takes atmospheric moisture to impact two-thirds of its material. Trees and brush can be 1,000-hour fuels while small fuels such as leaves and grass, fall into the 10-hour fuels category.

The 1,000-hour fuel moisture level, one of the main instruments scientists use to determine how dry a forest has become, was down to 15% on Friday when the average for this time of year is around 20%. Just a month ago the moisture level was 25%. The higher the percentage, the less likely there is a chance of extreme fire behavior.

Fuel moisture level, measured with electronic equipment, indicates how a wildfire will behave in a certain area. When available fuels are moist the combustion slows down, causing fires to burn most slowly and with less intensity. The opposite occurs when available fuels are dry.

The indexes used by fire officials to gauge moisture levels are well below average, said Boone Zimmerlee, who is responsible for facilitating the growth of a fire-adapted community strategy in Deschutes County through management of a wildfire preparedness program.

"Continued drying trends are likely to persist if we don't get moisture," Zimmerlee said.

The Energy Release Component index, which is related to how hot a wildfire can burn, shows that Central Oregon reached approximately 50 on Friday, double the average level for this time of year.

The dry conditions come as Western Oregon is still cleaning up from devastating La-

bor Day wildfires that burned 400,000 acres of land, destroyed more than 700 homes and killed five people.

While Central Oregon avoided the direct impacts of the flames, smoke from the fires in Western Oregon drifted over the mountains, creating a pall of unhealthy air that lasted a week. The dry fuels this year are a recipe for another big fire incident.

Larry O'Neill, director of Oregon Climate Services at Oregon State University in Corvallis, said the dry conditions are a disappointment for some climatologists, who were expecting more precipitation from the La Nina effect this winter.

"La Nina didn't really materialize, consequently much of the state is in at least severe drought," said O'Neill. "We are already witnessing impacts on agriculture and wildfire risk that we usually do not see until

July or August."

Parts of Klamath and Lake counties to the south of Bend are in exceptional drought for the first time since the U.S. Drought Monitor started in 2000. The tri-counties (Deschutes, Crook, and Jefferson) of Central Oregon are a mix of moderate, severe and extreme drought.

Central Oregon is also behind in snowpack, which does not bode well for sufficient late-season runoff that can help cool vegetation and forests. The snowpack is 84% of normal and water year-to-date precipitation is just 83% of normal, as of Friday.

Scott Oviatt, the snow survey supervisor for Natural Resources Conservation Service Oregon, says snowmelt is increasing because of unseasonably warm temperatures over the past week. High tempera-

tures hovered at 60 degrees but hit 80 on April 18.

"Snow is melting out more rapidly than melt rates observed over the last several years," said Oviatt. "This will lead to less surface water and upper level soil moisture being available in the early summer for use in irrigation and less available for forest vegetation."

Central Oregon has already seen increased levels of fire in 2021. The Oregon Department of Forestry has responded to eight fires in the tri-counties this year, compared to an average of

two fires for this time of year.

The Bull Springs Fire, which consumed 211 acres after a strong windstorm March 28, has been the largest blaze to date in Central Oregon this year. Stock said that wildfire was the result of dry fuels, high winds and low live fuel moisture levels.

Other parts of Oregon and Washington state have also seen early fire activity. The Ponina Fire in Klamath County was first reported on April 17 and grew to 1,641 acres before full containment.

The wild card, of course, is

precipitation. Rain is expected in Central Oregon over the weekend but it may not be enough to soak fuels for long. If May and June see increased rains, it could help to reduce the dry conditions from building in the region.

"How fire season goes is dependent on the amount and timing of rain," said Stock. "If we keep getting this dry pattern, you know, we will definitely be in high fire danger really early."

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