

Board of Commissioners Meeting Morrow County Sheriff's Office swears in two new deputies

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MCHD personnel—about eight out of 10 positions. “This is excellent for provider peer-review, case-by-case incidents,” said Jensen. “In an ASA where we would potentially have service agreements with providers, we expect that to happen under the providers, and then the providers report the generalities up to this advisory committee.”

If the proposed plan is adopted, the EMS Advisory Committee would be appointed by the board of commissioners and would review the overall performance of ambulance services, reconcile system performance issues, hear and reconcile issues between providers, consider requests for new providers, and review the ASA every five years.

“We’re looking at this committee to be more of, if there’s multiple or a single provider, how do we resolve system performance issues?” he said. “Are we having delays in callouts? Do we need additional stations?”

One change, a major bone of contention, establishes three ambulance service areas within the county to provide the option of multiple ambulance service providers. Jensen said the county is looking at a general division of the Boardman area, Irrigon area, and South County.

“This is not unheard of, and it’s not necessarily saying that we’re going to divide the county into three providers,” Jensen said. “It just says we have this option based on population.”

“Nowhere in this draft does it designate the provider,” he added. “There has been no decision to undo or dismantle the ambulance services of right now.”

Jensen said he believed the three areas reflected MCHD’s current setup, which generally works.

“However, if there is the fiscal, the callout, and the logistical opportunity for a provider to come in, we need to be able to review that independently, with an independent recommendation to the county,” he said.

He added that assumptions that Boardman Fire would be a provider were off base, as the county had not received a proposal from Boardman Fire.

“My apologies, chief,” he addressed Hughes. “I don’t even know if you’re capable because I have not seen anything.”

Jensen also said that Irrigon, for instance, is growing, and there might be a time when that city or other communities in the county want to provide their own ambulance services.

“We should be able to allow them to break free,” he said.

He also pointed out that a committee controlled by an interested party such as a provider could create issues of conflict, ethics, and lack of transparency.

“I’m not making those charges against the health district, but it creates the window of opportunity for them,” he added. “When you put it as an independent advisory committee with the commission approving or disapproving, you provide a layer of transparency and accountability.”

The new plan also updates technical requirements to refer to OHA and Oregon Revised Statutes standards rather than specific details that may become outdated.

Jensen said the county had already gone through the development of the draft, including input from

parties previously interested in providing ambulance services. The draft was then updated and submitted to the OHA for review.

Future steps will include final updates, feedback, OHA final review, a public hearing, and possible adoption of the ASA by the board of commissioners.

Following the adoption of the ASA plan, the county will advertise for ambulance providers and designate initial providers.

Jensen said the county is looking at several options for determining initial providers, all of which have pros and cons. Options include having the board of commissioners make the determination, having the new EMS Advisory Committee make a recommendation, or having an ad-hoc committee make the recommendation.

He said having the BOC make the decision would follow statutory guidelines and be the quickest solution, but that the commissioners don’t have expertise in ambulance services and it might overly expose EMS services to a potential political decision.

If the EMS committee were to make a recommendation, on the other hand, having providers on the committee might create conflicts of interest in decision-making.

An ad-hoc committee would be a small group of industry experts who would hopefully be impartial in recommending an initial provider and service agreement. However, such a committee is not currently outlined in the ASA, and the determination of the committee could also be seen as politically slanted.

The Next 90 Days
Jensen said the county’s original consideration had been to work with the health district to provide continuing ambulance services during the implementation of the new ASA. However, with MCHD’s 90-day notice to discontinue service, Morrow County will need to have an alternate plan in place by Tuesday, March 12, 2024. Jensen called MCHD’s decision “regrettable.”

“They say, ‘We need a service agreement before we can agree to an ambulance service plan.’ I’m saying, I can’t give you a service agreement until we have an ambulance service plan,” said Jensen. “So it’s a chicken and egg kind of conversation.”

The 90-day timeframe leaves the county with a tight timeline and limited options. Jensen said they will explore all options as necessary, including continued discussion with MCHD.

“They’ve expressed that desire. We’ll be exploring that,” he said. “We will be in touch with them and want to work with them because they are a strategic partner on this and other things and they deserve that consideration as more or less our incumbent.”

Barring that, the county might seek new providers to assume ambulance services, interim operations through agreements with neighboring providers, interim operations under county management or a combination of those.

Jensen admitted that the county didn’t yet have a plan because the health district’s decision was unexpected. However, he stressed that ambulance services would continue in all three areas regardless.

“We want to engage in a very participatory program, and I will be having

an update for ambulance service every commission meeting as we go through this process,” he said.

He also said he challenged comments that accused the county of lack of transparency.

“There are certain things in government that the elected bodies need to do, and it’s on our public schedule. That’s not a lack of transparency,” Jensen said. “That means our residents need to participate in the government process and come to the meetings and be informed and participate.”

“I know this is change,” Jensen finished. “It’s hard to change, but we feel like this is a change to get us into compliance with statutory requirements and that we can go forward and have a good relationship with providers.”

Jensen said he plans to have updates and information on the ASA on the county website. The next meeting of the Morrow County Board of Commissioners is scheduled for 9 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 3, in Heppner.



Sheriff John Bowles swears in two new Morrow County Patrol Deputies. Patrol Deputy Nick Berg on the right and Patrol Deputy Ryan Freeland. - Contributed Photo

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