

An Alton Ambulance? City says controversial move will provide revenue

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - According to a 2016 report published by **Roger D. Campbell** and **Maurice Hand Jr.** of **Lifestar Ambulance Service, Inc.** to **Alton Mayor Brant Walker**, providing an ambulance service through the **Alton Fire Department** may cost taxpayers upwards of \$2 million.

Both Walker and **Alton Fire Chief Bernie Sebold** agree that staggering figure is accurate - assuming they would hire additional personnel to run the ambulance service. The report, published on July 20, 2016 was provided to Riverbender.com, and said two

fully-staffed ambulances would cost the city an additional \$2,015,946 in payroll alone with a total of 18 new employees, according to current pay and pension figures for Alton firefighters. To provide a half-staffed ambulance service, which the report states would require at least nine additional employees, the city would incur an additional payroll cost of \$1,007,973.

Walker and Sebold said those numbers would not be a problem for local taxpayers - simply because they do not intend on hiring any additional firefighters to run the ambulance service. In fact, Walker said, the ambulance service was a well-researched plan concocted by Sebold in order to generate more revenue for the city.

"Our guys are already doing the work on the scene," Walker said. "We lose money when an ambulance comes and transports them from the scene. If we had an ambulance service operating from the city, that lost revenue could help us generate revenue without raising taxes."

Keeping taxes low while maintaining optimal city functions has been a challenge for Walker, Sebold and the other city department heads. Walker said he gave each department head the task of creating a plan for making additional revenue after realizing the city could no longer make anymore cuts.

"We have some pension issues in the city, so I charged every one of my department heads with making a plan to raise some revenue without increasing taxes," Walker said. "We went down the path of cutting, cutting, cutting, and it didn't do much. So we are working on using our resources to generate revenue to grow the city and alleviate debt without raising taxes."

Sebold said his plan was "very well researched." He said the firefighters, which currently operate the large ladder truck, would operate the ambulance service. He said the department is looking to purchase a pair of used ambulances, at a cost of around \$110,000. Sebold said he is looking to find a good deal on stretchers as well as other equipment, such as IVs.

Rates for transport would be comparable to Lifestar and **Alton Memorial** ambulance services, Walker and Sebold said. The city would only provide transport from the scene to local hospitals, however. Inter-facility transports, like from nursing homes to hospitals and from hospital to hospital, will not be done by the city ambulance service under this plan.

Both Lifestar and Alton Memorial ambulance services will still have a place in the River Bend, Sebold and Walker agreed.

"They both cover an area much larger than Alton," Sebold said. "Lifestar operates in other areas across the state, and Alton Memorial says their ambulance service covers as much as 200 square miles."

The costs of the initial purchase of the ambulances and supplies may soon be offset, Sebold said. He said dispatching the ambulance directly to the scene in the cases of many emergencies would save fuel costs of sending a fire engine.

"The ambulance is a lighter, more fuel-efficient vehicle," Sebold said.

Sebold also addressed Campbell's report, saying it would be true if the department was hiring additional personnel. He said he "respected" Campbell for looking out for his business, but said the taxpayers of Alton should not worry about the city taking more expenses.

"If we were to run an ambulance service out of the fire department and have personnel dedicated to only the ambulance, and not cross-trained on anything else, but only staffing the ambulance, those numbers are correct," Sebold said. "Under Mr. Campbell's standards, he is indicating we would hire people solely dedicated to the ambulance, which is not the case."

Walker said the firefighters would be paid the same whether they were at the station washing a fire engine or responding to emergencies. He said the ambulance service would utilize the firefighters' paramedic and EMT training, which already occurs when they respond to calls in the fire engines. He said the additional provision of ambulance transport would only work to generate revenue for the city.

Alton would not be the only city in the area operating an ambulance service through its fire department. **Collinsville, Maryville, Edwardsville** and **Granite City** also operate ambulance services through their fire departments. Granite City, which is the most comparable in demographics to Alton, made \$1 million through their service last year, Sebold said.

Another Illinois city operating an ambulance service through its fire department is **Mattoon**. Sebold and Walker said that city, which has a smaller population, but similar demographics to Alton, was already making a significant profit, despite its ambulance program only being a few years old.

In 2015, the Alton Fire Department responded to approximately 1,500 emergency calls, which may have utilized the ambulance. They had a total call volume of approximately 3,300.

Sebold said nearly 90 percent of calls, which would normally have fire engines dispatched to them, could be met with the ambulance instead. He said the personnel at the Alton Fire Department will remain at 43 firefighters, even after the ambulance service is started. Walker and Sebold hope to start the service by the end of the year.