Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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With no objections voiced at public hearing, Port officials set to pursue goal of upgrading service

A small group of people on Monday heard Port Washington fire and ambulance officials lay out their plans to upgrade to a paramedic service.

When the 30-minute public hearing ended, one resident encouraged the department to pursue its goal.

“I think the EMTs are doing a fine job, but they’re limited in what they can do,” Jim Johnson said. “I think it’s time, and we are big enough, that we should go up to this level.”

Fire Chief Mark Mitchell concurred, noting that many people in the community already believe the EMTs are paramedics.

“We almost owe it to people to provide this,” he said. “The need is there. The numbers are there. I think we’ve got all the parts needed to make this work.”

Paramedics receive a significantly higher level of training that enables them to better assess patients, administer more medications and conduct procedures that EMTs cannot perform, said Thomas Dietrich, the medical director for Columbia St. Mary’s Ozaukee Hospital.

“Those are the skills that may save your life,” he said. “In many circumstances, it could make the difference between getting to the hospital and not getting there at all.”

They are especially important in cases such as heart attacks, he said, where paramedics can administer medications that typically would be given in the hospital.

The same is true in seizure cases, where medications that paramedics administer can stop the seizure, Dietrich said.

“The big lifesavers are cardiac meds we can give people to stop lethal arrhythmias,” he said. “A lot of this stuff, it may not happen often, but when it does, you want to be able to do these things.”

Mitchell noted that in 2009, the ambulance services had 720 calls, and he estimated 25% of those cases could have benefitted from paramedic services.

Although the department calls for Thiensville’s paramedics to meet them along the way when those services are needed, often the ambulance is almost to the hospital by the time the two meet, he said, estimating it typically takes the Thiensville service about 20 minutes to meet up with Port’s.

“That’s just too long for someone to wait for paramedic intervention,” he said.

Dietrich noted that if Port Washington upgrades to a paramedic service, it will benefit not just city residents but residents throughout northern Ozaukee County because Port's ambulance can respond to these scenes much more quickly than Thiensville.

The department is proposing beginning paramedic service on a part-time basis Jan. 1 and, over two years, converting to a full-time paramedic service, Mitchell said.

Four of the department EMTs are certified paramedics, and they would form the core group for the service in the first year, he added.

The city would continue to recruit paramedics on a part-time basis to fully staff the service, Mitchell said.

The cost of the conversion would be covered through increased fees charged for the paramedic service, he said.

The Police and Fire Commission, which held the hearing, offered its support for the paramedic program as well.

Mitchell noted that the department has submitted its paramedic proposal to the state, which must approve it before the service can begin.

After the state gives its approval, the commission and the Common Council will also need to approve it, Mitchell said.