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ConFire-AMR Partnership Forges Ahead

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District moved another step closer to providing emergency ambulance service in Contra Costa County on May 12 when the Board of Supervisors, acting as the ConFire board of directors, authorized fire chief Jeff Carman to execute an agreement between the district and American Medical Response, the current provider of county ambulance service. The agreement details the relationship between the district and AMR if ConFire is awarded the 5-year Contra Costa County emergency ambulance service contract effective Jan. 1, 2016. The county regions up for bid exclude the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, which provide their own ambulance transport service.

After a district consultant reported in 2014 that it would be financially feasible for ConFire to provide ambulance service for the county, AP Triton, LLC, a fire consultant, advised the district that the most suitable and cost effective way to provide that service was to partner with a private ambulance company. Through a competitive bidding process, ConFire chose to partner with AMR, under a subcontractor agreement with the district.

Should the county award ConFire the ambulance contract AMR, as the ambulance subcontractor, will provide the district its own personnel and equipment and will also be responsible for maintaining and upgrading the ambulance fleet. Over the five years of the deal ConFire will pay AMR not more than \$188 million for this service, which Carman explained would be the district's maximum financial exposure. ConFire will bill and collect patient fees and charges, reimbursements from healthcare providers and other emergency ambulance transport revenue to cover those expenses.

"Even at the maximum costs, this proposal will make financial sense to the district?" asked John Gioia, board chair.

"Absolutely," said Carman.

Carman later pointed out indirect benefits of the relationship with AMR, including consolidation of personnel and other potential costs savings. "AMR has huge buying power for medical supplies," he said. "At the same time, we have better buying power for fuel since we use so much, and they can take advantage of that."

Erik Rohde, AMR general manager for Contra Costa County, discussed the synergy of merging dispatch personnel. "ConFire's dispatch center is in Pleasant Hill and ours is in Sacramento," he said. "By putting them in the same room, the dispatchers will have the ability to communicate real time, face to face, rather than over a phone or computer."

And one of Carman's top frustrations will frustrate him no longer. "We won't send a fire company and an ambulance to everything anymore," he said. "Now we can send just what is needed and closest. This adds capacity to our response reliability."

The Board of Supervisors plans to approve the new county ambulance contract in July. If ConFire is awarded the deal, and the district successfully enters into the subcontract with AMR, it will have joined forces with its long-time rival.

"We will share mission and vision," said the chief. "Instead of competing, we will be working as a single team.

"Truly this relationship will be better for the agencies and the customer."

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