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ConFire County Ambulance Proposal on the Table

By Nick Marnell

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and American Medical Response submitted its joint proposal May 21 to Contra Costa County Health Services to acquire the available county ambulance contract beginning in 2016. ConFire chose AMR, the current county ambulance provider, as its partner in order to leverage their combined resources and experience in the emergency medical services industry. Contra Costa County Fire and EMS, together with AMR - known as the Alliance - submitted the only proposal to the county.

"I can't say we were surprised or not surprised," said Jesse Allured, county EMS program coordinator, of the sole submission. "We knew the response would be limited, based on what we saw at the bidders' conference." Besides ConFire and AMR, only two private ambulance companies attended that March conference.

Dale Feldhauser, chief operating officer of Paramedics Plus, a San Leandro EMS systems management organization, explained why his company did not bid on the contract. "The finances of the ambulance business have changed considerably," he said. "A partnership with a public entity is the only way to go now." Medi-Cal, a government health coverage provider, reimburses pennies on the dollar for ambulance transport, and through the federal ground emergency medical transport program, a public ambulance provider receives additional money to offset the losses incurred as a result of the low payment. "The federal money does not fully reimburse the lost revenue caused by the low reimbursement, but it is better than what a private ambulance transport system can currently collect," said ConFire chief Jeff Carman.

Feldhauser said that his company did not respond to ConFire's earlier request seeking a private ambulance partner. "I thought AMR was best for that system, and I wish them the best of luck," he said. "I think AMR will make this work."

Gary Tennyson, chief executive officer of Falck Northern California, a division of one of the world's largest healthcare organizations and a bidders' conference attendee, did not respond as to why his company did not submit a proposal to the county.

The document submitted by the Alliance lays out particulars of its experience, financial stability, available resources and commitment to the community. The 180-page presentation includes such minute details as how often ambulances will undergo an oil change (every 5,000 miles, page 114) and the size of the logos on the sides of the ambulances (4-inch letters, minimum, page 104).

Financial information was not publicized. "We don't want to have this information used for the wrong reasons, possibly by a competitor," said Allured. Citygate Associates LLC, a public sector consultant, will vet the financials to make sure that the proposed venture is realistic and sustainable.

"While we haven't won the bid yet, we are almost there," said Carman. The Board of Supervisors expects to award the contract this fall.

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