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February 15, 2004 Sunday

**SECTION:** Pg. 1A**LENGTH:** 561 words**HEADLINE:** Fire Dept. sells switch**BYLINE:** Linda Martz, [lmartz@nncogannett.com](mailto:lmartz@nncogannett.com)**BODY:**

News Journal

MANSFIELD -- The Mansfield Fire Department says its proposal to take over 911 transports to MedCentral/Mansfield Hospital will benefit citizens.

But private ambulance companies are mounting an active fight against the Issue 1 on the city's March 2 ballot.

The plan would switch primary responsibility for hospital transports to the fire department. Most transports are handled now by four private companies on a four-day rotation.

The fire department says the proposed charter amendment would improve patient continuity of care and help the department find revenues to improve service.

It is unfair to taxpayers, the department says, that city rescue squads arrive first on the scene and give the first medical treatment -- then turn patients over to private ambulance companies, which pocket any fees for taking patients to the hospital.

The opposition group, Mansfield Citizens for Safe and Affordable Healthcare, says the city does not have enough equipment to handle transport business. It also contends start-up and operating costs will be higher than projected and that easing private companies out will take healthy competition out of the service mix.

Another bone of contention with the plan is whether or not residents would end up paying more than they now do for city ambulance services.

Private services say the plan amounts to "double taxation" because the city, which already collects a safety tax, would start charging residents who are transported \$585 for basic medical transport per ride or \$493 for advanced medical transport.

Fire officials say residents already pay both costs anyway.

"We don't view it as double taxation," Fire Chief Michael Hartgen said. He said the proposed change would use already available and paid-for man- power and equipment more efficiently.

Firefighters say it is better to have transport fees go to the city, where they would recirculate in the community.

Unlike private companies, the city would collect transport fees only from insurance companies; it would not bill individual residents or take them to small claims court to collect, firefighters say.

But **Scott Pullins**, the attorney and Columbus-based consultant who heads up the opposition group, said three out of the four private services have local owners.

Private companies use local employees, pay local income and sales taxes and donate generously to the community, he said.

Mansfield Citizens representatives say they doubt the city would actually reap its projected estimated revenues of \$1.152 million.

Jason Dotson, vice president of Critical Life, said the city cannot realistically expect to collect on a projected 57 percent of all transports.

"Mansfield has a very poor payment base," he said. "There is no one collecting 57 percent across the board."

Start-up costs would be minimal, Hartgen said, because the department already is equipped with ambulances, as first responder to 5,300 **EMS** calls a year. The department already has beefed up its emergency medical service to 23 certified paramedics and 60 or more EMTs, he said.

Dotson said the fire chief complains he is short firefighters, with manpower reduced from 106 to 96.

"If you currently don't have enough manpower to handle your current responsibilities, how is the city going to handle primary transport?" he said.

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