



Rescue efforts on life support

By Andrew Ostroski
Staff Writer

BETHANY BEACH -- The Millville Volunteer Fire Company has announced they will cease ambulance service to the Bethany Beach fire district on Jan. 1, 2009, and now area fire officials are working feverishly to assemble a replacement company.

With less than nine months until the deadline, members of the Bethany Beach Volunteer Fire Company have been meeting with government officials in hopes of finding a solution. If all goes well, training for new employees could begin as early as November, fire officials said.

According to Bob Powell, public information officer for the Millville Volunteer Fire Company and a firefighter since 1980, daily operations of the agency have changed drastically in recent years, causing the company to limit service.

"When I first started with the fire company, we were able to handle all of the ambulance calls strictly through volunteers," said Powell, noting that 35 percent of Millville's calls in 2006 were to locations in the Bethany Beach fire district. "As the call volume went up, paid people had to be brought on board to make sure we could cover all of the calls we received."

That's why, he said, his company was forced to draw a line.

But fire officials in Bethany Beach say they aren't going to let that decision negatively impact public safety. They aim to ensure those who live in the district's 10,000 private residences will have someone local to call on in case of an emergency. If established, the company would serve Bethany Beach, Fenwick Island, Sea Colony and South Bethany.

"We need the ambulance service and we can't really rely on Roxana or Millville to come that distance, particularly in the summer, to cover this area," South Bethany Manager Melvin Cusick said. "We're glad the fire company stepped up to the plate and decided to provide service to us. (Millville has) enough of their own territory to cover."

The times, they are a changin'

In its 60 years, the Bethany Beach Volunteer Fire Company has lacked an ambulance service.

They have left medical transport up to the Millville Volunteer Fire Company which has covered calls along Route 1 between the Indian River Inlet and Ocean City, Md.

Currently, the Millville Volunteer Fire Company employs nine career paramedics and 20 seasonal emergency medical technicians who assist the professionals.

With the rate at which the Bethany and Millville fire districts have grown over the decades, local emergency services have been forced to adapt and expand. The growing amount of calls takes its toll on both the department's manpower and equipment, Powell said.

"Obviously, the greater call amount has a larger effect on our EMTs," he said. "There are times when we

have all three of our ambulances on the road."

Keeping up with the summer crowds is also a situation the Millville Volunteer Fire Company has addressed, he said.

"We actually station an ambulance at the Bethany Beach fire station between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.," he said. "This year, we have put it in our budget to have a crew down there 24 hours a day so we can provide them with a more effective ambulance service."

Millville also currently responds to coverage calls in Roxana, Frankford and Dagsboro if another company's ambulances are unable to respond. Powell said that type of service will not be affected.

Staying on schedule

The ambulance service has been a hot topic since the Bethany Beach Volunteer Fire Company made their initial proposals in January. Since then, representatives of the fire company have had multiple meetings with area officials to discuss the future of the program.

Bob Minutoli, administrative assistant to Chief Tom Moore of the Bethany Beach Volunteer Fire Company, said the program is on schedule.

"The greatest amount of conversation has been with mayors and councils," he said. "In our minds, they have been 100 percent supportive of our plans because they, just as we, recognize how vital ambulance service is to our community."

Finding funds for the project has also been a team effort, Minutoli said. The ambulance service comes with a projected start-up cost of nearly \$400,000. Fiscal-year 2009 expenditures for the department are more than \$550,000. Expenses passed on to the public will come in the form of subscriptions to the ambulance service, which are projected to cost homeowners between \$35 and \$40 annually, Minutoli said.

"We are working through the Volunteer Fire Service, the Fire Prevention Commission and the state and county to identify both traditional and non-traditional funding for service," he said. "They have both been very helpful. We're looking at grants to handle our one-time startup costs."

Concerns

Cusick said Bethany Beach's plan appears to be the only viable option for his town. Officials, he said, are on the verge of approving the project and that will likely take place when the fire company presents a finalized proposal.

"We're working out the agreements now," Cusick said. "There really haven't been any concerns, (only) that we still have an ambulance service."

Reaction to the ambulance service has also been positive from those who will be most affected by the changeover -- the residents.

Alan Huebner, a resident of Bayview Park near South Bethany, said residents in his area support the project.

"I'm in favor of Bethany Beach doing this and I know that the homeowner's association is interested," he said. "This is something that's overdue in this area. The Bethany Beach Volunteer Fire Company is a lot

closer to us than Millville."

In the best interest of residents, Millville's staff has been assisting the Bethany Beach Volunteer Fire Company in the changeover, Powell said.

"We have spoken very positively in favor of this," he said. "We have encouraged (the towns) to get behind it and to support it. We've shared our costs and expenses with Bethany Beach so they would have a good idea of what they're going to find and what it would cost for equipment and employees."

The future of the program, Powell said, looks bright.

"They are very organized," he said. "They have a timeline for what they want to do and when, and it looks like they're achieving all of their goals."

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