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TOP STORY

Public Safety

American Canyon looks at paramedic fee for insurance companies only

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American Canyon wants to charge patients \$500 for paramedic care provided by its American Canyon Fire Protection District, but only if the money comes from insurance.

City Council members sitting as the Fire District Board discussed the issue last week. The four present – chairman Leon Garcia, vice chairwoman Mariam Aboudamous, Mark Joseph and Kenneth Leary – told Chief Glen Weeks to come back with an ordinance at a future meeting.

The district since 2014 has had firefighters provide basic or advanced life support care, with the service paid for by property taxes. Firefighters often arrive at a medical emergency faster than an ambulance and begin treating the patient.

The district responded to 800 medical calls in 2017 and was the first responder in most cases, a district report stated.

Charging \$500 for first responder medical calls would raise \$70,000 to \$90,000 annually for a paramedic program that costs taxpayers more than \$100,000 annually. That could fund such things as more medical equipment and a battalion chief for training, fire district officials said.

But this would be what the district called “compassionate” billing, meaning only the patient’s insurance company would receive a bill and have to pay. A patient who has no insurance wouldn’t be charged.

“The insurance companies would have to pay out more,” Garcia said. “How are they recovering that?”

District officials said these types of fees have no impact on insurance policy rates. A higher level of emergency service care provided at the outset lowers the cost of medical care in the long run.

“Do property taxpayers necessarily want to help subsidize for insurance companies that are budgeting for and expecting to pay, but they’re not paying?” Weeks said.

Similar fees are charged by more than 130 fire departments in California without changing insurance policies, a district report said. For example, the Moraga Orinda Fire District charges \$600, Fairfield Fire Department \$402 and Salinas Fire Department \$363.

The city of Napa Fire Department charges no fee for paramedic service, but Weeks said it has a paramedic tax.

On average, a medical response by American Canyon Fire Protection District costs \$517.49. That includes the salaries of the personnel, the dispatch service cost, supplies and an average round trip of four miles, a district report said.

“I think if we can deflect some of the cost we incur for that level of service to an insurance company, it seems like the right course of action,” Joseph said.

The decision isn't up to the Fire District Board alone. Weeks said Napa County Emergency Medical Services Agency must also approve the proposed fee and has expressed support in principle.

CITY OF AMERICAN CANYON



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Barry Eberling covers Napa County government, transportation, the environment and general assignments. He has worked for the Napa Valley Register since fall 2014 and previously worked 27 years for the Daily Republic of Fairfield.