

Riverview threats won't affect ambulance service: province

Escalating deficit caused by out-of-town calls blamed as Riverview considers refusing Moncton calls

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Reports this week that the Town of Riverview

might soon refuse to send its two ambulances on calls to Moncton or, alternatively, it will cut its fleet to one with similar effect, no doubt has many people wondering just what might happen should either measure come to pass.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health promised yesterday that ambulance service will be maintained regardless of how the matter plays out, but the provincial ambulance service didn't com-

ment further on the situation.

At a meeting of Riverview town council on Monday, fire chief Doug Hamer said Riverview continues to subsidize the ambulance service in Moncton, with 416 of its last 1,500 calls coming from the other side of the river.

Ward 1 Coun. Ron Davis said Riverview am-

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balance is subsidizing the Moncton service and absorbing a big deficit in its ambulance costs each year. He said the cost of the service to the town in 2005 was \$924,000, while the province's contribution was \$537,000.

More alarming, Hamer said yesterday was the fact the total number of calls Riverview handled in 2005 jumped by 500 in one year.

"If that happened just from '04 to '05, what's going to happen, especially this summer?" he asked.

Part of that jump comes from a province-wide 20 per cent increase in ambulance use since service fees were lifted. But Hamer and others in Riverview are also pointing the finger at the Moncton Ambulance Service, which typically runs the same number of ambulances as its much smaller neighbouring community.

Riverview and Moncton both run two ambulances 24 hours a day, although Moncton puts a third vehicle into service during the day on weekdays to help handle the increased number of medical transfers between hospitals. The third ambulance is not solely dedicated to transfers, however. Rather, all three share the load of transfers and emergencies equally.

And when the two or three Moncton ambulances are all tied up and another is needed, neighbouring ambulance services are called upon through mutual aid agreements. Often the neighbour called upon is Riverview, though Dieppe's ambulance service also did almost 20 per cent of its calls outside Dieppe in the year 2004, the most recent figure that could be provided. How many of those were to Moncton and not other jurisdictions is not clear.

Despite how it might seem to someone unfamiliar with the province's ambulance system, this is not really the bickering between neighbouring municipalities that has been seen with other issues like water or policing.

The Riverview Ambulance Service is run by the Town of Riverview under contract with the Province of New Brunswick, but the Moncton Ambulance Service has no direct connection to the City of Moncton or its fire department.

Moncton's service is actually run by the South-East Regional Health Authority at the Moncton Hospital under contract with the province. Adding to confusion of roles among the general public is ambulance service in Dieppe. The City of Dieppe used to run an ambulance service through its fire department, but shut it down in 1998 after the municipality failed to get more provincial money to operate it. The City of Dieppe then hired Tantram-Beauséjour Ambulance Ltd., a private company which, despite the name, has no affiliation with the

Beauséjour Health Authority.

So when Riverview is drawing this line in the sand, they are drawing it in the province's sandbox.

The provincial ambulance service is run by the Department of Health. Department spokeswoman Johanne LeBlanc said yesterday the department wouldn't comment on what it considered a political situation. She did however give the assurance that "ambulance service will be provided in any case," whatever Riverview should decide to do.

But don't Moncton ambulances respond to calls in Riverview? They do indeed, said Craig Pierre, manager of Ambulance Services for the South-East Regional Health Authority.

"We do have an agreement with our surrounding areas," he said. "Everybody does. We all have mutual aid agreements that if one service is out on a call and another call comes in, that they will come in and do it, same as we would for instance go to Riverview for them."

It is, however, not nearly as big an issue for the Moncton service. Reached at his home, Pierre said he could retrieve statistics on the number of calls that his service goes on outside Moncton if he had to, but added it was not something he routinely tracked.

"As long as a truck (ambulance) goes on the call that's all we care about," he said.

The numbers give him that luxury Pierre said that out of the Moncton Ambulance Service's thousands of calls each year, there would be a certain percentage that go into Dieppe, Riverview or Salisbury, but the number would be a relatively small.

"Out of 8,000 calls, you'd be looking at a couple hundred maybe in mutual aid."

Figures provided by the Mobile Health Services Quality Agency support Pierre's ballpark estimate. The agency, established as a support structure for ambulance services and the Department of Health and Wellness, shows Moncton ambulances tended to spend only two to three per cent of their time on mutual aid calls over the past five years or so.

Pierre acknowledged that the percentage of mutual aid calls Riverview is doing represents a more significant concern for the town.

One specific incident that came up at the Riverview council meeting might leave some with the wrong impression of the Moncton Ambulance Service though, a situation which Pierre took time to clarify it was reported earlier this week that two Moncton ambulances left the scene of the armed stand-off at a West Main Street motel last Friday when 4 p.m. rolled around, forcing Riverview's service to pick up the slack.

There was a bit more to it than that, Pierre said.

One and sometimes two Moncton

ambulances were at the scene at various times throughout the day, on standby should things turn violent. They were, however, still available to respond to other emergencies that might arise, so being parked there was not unlike them being parked anywhere else in the city waiting for a call. At 4 p.m., the third city ambulance on duty did indeed book off, as it normally would.

"At four o'clock, there were no calls going on," Pierre said. "There was the standby (at the stand-off) and some transfers, so the eight-to-four truck went home." He added the staff of that ambulance was asked if they could stay on but had other commitments.

"If a 911 call had come in at four, they'd have done the call, but just to standby there they couldn't stay."

With that, one of the two remaining ambulances was doing transfers and the third remained at the motel incident.

Unfortunately a 911 call came in shortly afterward, so the standby truck responded. "Riverview was then requested to provide standby while we cleared from the 911 call," Pierre explained.

While that helps put the one incident in context, the question posed by the Riverview fire chief remains. Should a city the size of Moncton run only two ambulances most of the time and only three ambulances some of the time?

It's the sort of issue that might be addressed by the long-awaited overhaul of New Brunswick's ambulance system, but it's a pending change heavy on the pending and light on the change so far.

"We have to say to the province, 'fish or cut bait.' You told us last year you were going to do this," Hamer said. "They keep saying, 'yes it's coming,' but we can't wait."

"If there's, God forbid, an election in a couple weeks, we're back to square one."

Because Riverview's ambulances are staffed by the fire department's regular complement of firefighters, there would be no lay-offs if one ambulance was taken out of service. Hamer acknowledged that lost with that ambulance, should it be removed from the rotation, would be the couple of hundred calls it does in Riverview each year. A new first responder truck the town is buying, however, will get paramedics to medical emergencies quickly and offer care during the wait for an ambulance.

And the town would not be selling the ambulance at auction or anything like that. Riverview's ambulances — the vehicles themselves — are property of the province.

Asked what he would do if the province opted to move them to Moncton: "Here's the keys," Hamer said. "you want them, take them," he said. "You can have 15 trucks over there, but you have to staff them."

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