

Riverview council drops ambulance

■ Council votes to negotiate with province to take over service by July 1

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Riverview is finished as a provider of ambulance service.

Town council voted at last night's meeting to negotiate a provincial government takeover of their ambulance service by July 1 at the latest.

"It's time to call their bluff," Councilor Bob Davis said of the province, which has said for about two years that it is ready to amalgamate all 54 ambulance services in the province into a single service provider, something that hasn't happened yet despite those vows.

The move comes not because of the cost of the service but because of concerns that town residents could be left with inadequate fire protection during ambulance calls.

Riverview has the only fire department where every member is a trained paramedic and able to answer ambulance calls. The town feels the province is taking advantage of Riverview's capabilities by increasingly relying on it to provide ambulance service beyond the town's boundaries. The town receives even less money from the province for out-of-town calls than it used to get several years ago, but it's the service's impact on fire protection that really worries council.

Fire chief Doug Hester explained that four firefighters are, ideally, on duty at any one time. When someone is sick or on holidays, that number is reduced to three. When an ambulance call comes in, that number is reduced to one. Someone is then summoned from home and asked to come to work.

Last year, Riverview's ambulance was called out 1,111 times, about 800 of those calls were in Moncton addresses. So while Riverview's paramedics are serving people who don't even live in the town, Riverview residents are being shortchanged on firefighters, at least until someone can be summoned from home and told to come to work.

Firefighters will still act as first responders in a medical emergency, and Hester said there's certainly new recruits can't continue to take full EMT training, so that Riverview's 16 professional firefighters will remain among the best trained anywhere and will still respond to medical calls — but in fire trucks, not ambulances.

Deputy Mayor Bob Hyslop resigned the town may vote without comment.

Riverview's 30-year-old ambulance service is a source of immense civic pride and some residents will lament its loss, creating a decade after its equally beloved policing service was merged with Moncton's and Dieppe's with the creation of the Colliac Regional RCMP.

But council was adamant the ambulance service is too much of a fire-safety issue.

"It's been my nightmare that we are going to be caught with a serious fire and not enough people to cover it," Coun. Charles Broderick said.

Adding insult to injury, Riverview was thrust without its knowledge into the role of sometimes covering the area all the way to Riverside-Albert. When that area's ambulance service is busy, Riverview's only ambulance is ordered by provincial dispatchers to drive down to that area and park, in case it is needed there. That takes away two firefighters for an average of three hours each time.

So far this year, Riverview's ambulance has been called to Moncton 64 times, to the Hillsborough/Riverside-Albert region 28 times and in town 215 times.