



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Shelley B. Mayer

Hudson Valley One: Board members discuss “ambulance crisis” in the Town of Ulster

CRISPIN KOTT August 8, 2024

Local emergency services workers came before the Ulster Town Board last week to share concerns about the potential for overstretched volunteer fire departments and companies to reach those in need in a timely manner.

Though not on the agenda at the Thursday, August 1 town board meeting, a handful of speakers addressed council members about what Ulster Hose Co. No. 5 Chief Shawn Heppner called an “ambulance crisis in the Town of Ulster.”

“In the past year, the quality of (emergency) services has deteriorated significantly,” Heppner said. “This decline is not only taxing our emergency responders, but more importantly, it’s putting lives at risk due to the lack of availability of ambulances and increased response times. The situation has created potential life-threatening circumstances for patients who need proper transportation to the hospital.”

Heppner cited data covering the first six months of 2024, noting that there were 1,162 emergency medical services (EMS) within the town, with the Ulster Hose Fire District responding to 944.

“The primary commercial ambulance (Empress) failed to respond to...49 calls for service,” Heppner said. “That’s 5.2 percent. With that being said, another agency had to be called in for these cases.”

Heppner added that the percentages were even more concerning in other parts of the town, with “the commercial agency” failing to respond to 19 out of 218 calls.

“Another agency had to be called for every one of these calls, and it’s crucial to note that relying on other agencies impacts the emergency response capabilities of neighboring municipalities,” Heppner said, adding that while the current EMS system provides for mutual aid between municipalities when necessary, it has been imbalanced in the Town of Ulster.

“While an EMS agency eventually responded to all 68 calls in our district, the response times were significantly extended,” Heppner said. “In many cases, patients were forced to wait 40 minutes or longer for an ambulance...The situation is absolutely unacceptable. During medical emergencies, every minute counts and the extended wait times are putting our community members’ lives at risk. These extended wait times are not merely an inconvenience. They can mean the difference between life and death in critical situations. Our town deserves better.”

John Quick, a member of the Spring Lake Fire Department and town EMS meeting facilitator said the situation could be aided by the state deeming EMS as an essential service as they were four years ago during the global pandemic.

“During the COVID crisis, our state government allowed that EMS was, as well as police and other emergency services, an essential service,” Quick said. “Since 2021, all of the emergency services within New York State have tried to have the New York State Legislature...make

EMS an essential service within New York State.”

S4020C, EMS legislation sponsored by Senator Shelley B. Mayer, and co-sponsored by Senator Michelle Hinchey was unanimously passed by the Senate in late May. It is currently under review in an Assembly committee.

If enacted, the bill would deem EMS as an essential service and establish statewide, regional and county coordination of services. It would also give municipalities like the Town of Ulster greater control of how emergency services are handled in their own community.

“Under the existing framework for the provision of EMS in New York, private, public and not-for-profit providers serve needs across the state in a scattered, patchwork approach,” reads Mayer’s prospective legislation. “This leaves many New Yorkers uncertain whether an EMS provider will be available in their time of need. Creating greater flexibility for municipalities to facilitate EMS to meet unique local challenges represents a critical next step in the provision of these much-needed services.”

Matthew Molinaro, a firefighter and EMT with Ulster Hose Co. No. 5, said volunteers “feel helpless” while waiting for an ambulance for anywhere between 15 minutes to an hour. He called for an overhaul not only of the local system, but the system across the country.

“The EMS system nationwide is broken,” Molinaro said. “It’s overwhelmed, overworked, underpaid and unfortunately, it’s mostly abused. People are calling 911 for a variety of reasons that are not acceptable and that may not need the service of a full ambulance. Some of these may be rides to the hospitals, headaches, stubbed toes, trips or falls that may not need that attention, evaluations, psychiatric emergencies. Unfortunately, there are not enough available units designated to handle all of these calls, not only in Ulster County and the town of Ulster, but nationwide.”

Town Supervisor James E. Quigley, III said that while establishing a fire department-based ambulance service might work in the City of Kingston, it might prove too costly and insufficient in the Town of Ulster.

“There are many arguments being used against them, including the fact that there is a fixed number of EMTs and staff available to staff the rigs, and that any additional service area will demand new rigs, which means that the wage rates will go up and the people will be stolen from other agencies, which is what has been demonstrated when the City of Kingston implemented their fire department-based ambulance services,” Quigley said. “They were able to offer union wages, medical coverage and state pensions, and they were able to draw a number of EMTs from the volunteer and private ambulance services around the area.”

He added that doing the same in the Town of Ulster could cost around \$1.5 million, “and it will only guarantee us one ambulance, and that will not suffice for the number of calls that are generated town-wide, let alone the Ulster (Hose Fire) District.”

Town officials said they hoped a solution could come at the county level.

“When you look at the efficiencies of scale, the city is getting by with it because there’s a big concentration in that area,” said deputy supervisor Clayton Van Kleeck. “When you start looking at all of us as outlying towns, this has to be addressed in a broader way with all of the EMS in the Town of Ulster, but all the surrounding towns, and it would encourage us all to really push at a county level.”

Empress EMS could not be reached for comment.

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