**Residents urge county to nix EMS ordinance**

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Folks were pretty passionate. The fate of Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad was on the line, they feared.

Last Wednesday, June 16, a crowd gathered in the Highland High School gym to tell supervisors what they thought of the EMS ordinance proposed by the county to provide a consistent umbrella of direction and management for all EMS services.

And overwhelmingly, they said, they felt confused by the need for it, and opposed its formality. Nearly everyone addressing the Highland County Board of Supervisors urged them not to pass it, and continue negotiating with the Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad to resolve differences.

In fact, HCVRS president Paul Trible said if the board passed the ordinance that night, the squad had voted to immediately suspend its rescue service to the county.

Background

Both supervisor Harry Sponaugle and county administrator Roberta Lambert explained how the county and squad had reached this point.

Sponaugle emphasized that, contrary to rumors, the county had no control over the volunteer fire departments and had never discussed them in relation to the proposed ordinance.

He explained the volunteer rescue squad had asked for help at least three times since 2014 because its ranks had thinned and it was having trouble answering calls. The county and squad had several discussions about how to address the problem. An EMS coordinator was hired; when he left for another job, an EMS chief and deputy chief were hired to replace him, and HCVRS and the county entered into a Memorandum of Understanding about shared resources.

But last year, tensions between the paid staff and volunteers began to arise, Sponaugle said. “One volunteer told the board of supervisors the county wouldn’t get the (HCVRS) assets if the volunteers ceased,” he said. “After that comment on assets, we thought, ‘Where will the paid staff go?’ The volunteers owned both buildings, not the county.”

So when the former car wash building on Main Street in Monterey came up for auction last fall, the county bought it. Sponaugle said the board didn’t discuss doing that publicly beforehand out of concern it would drive up the bidding; plus, he said, the county was in need of storage space.

He said the volunteers soon made it clear they wanted the paid chief and deputy chief out of their building. “We tried to ease tensions,” he said, but finally in February, the HCVRS gave notice it intended to revoke the MOU. HCVRS told the county it would no longer allow paid staff access to its vehicles after May 18 unless paid staff agreed to follow HCVRS policies.

“The volunteers wanted every control, to tell them what to do,” Sponaugle said, “but the paid staff are county employees and answer only to the board of supervisors.”

Sponaugle said the proposed ordinance does not restrict HCVRS from operating just as it does now, it only proposes the paid EMS chief would oversee all EMS agencies in the county. “We need a level of consistency at the top,” he said.

“We never considered shutting down the volunteers,” he added. “The county needs both for the best service. The most important question for the county is, are EMS calls being answered? And the answer is finally yes.”

After Sponaugle opened the hearing, Lambert also explained the history of the arrangement. She stressed both HCVRS and the newer Bolar Volunteer Rescue Squad have the right to pursue revenue recovery funds, and under the proposed ordinance, both squads can operate the way they always have — with bylaws and protocols they establish for their squads. The purpose of the ordinance, she said, would be to direct the paid EMS chief to establish efficient policies and provisions for coordinating the county paid staff with the volunteer squads.

Lambert also acknowledged receiving that night a petition signed by more than 300 people requesting the county postpone a vote on the ordinance until a fuller understanding could be had about the situation. The petition also asked for details on the car wash building expenses.

Passionate pleas

Over the course of the next two hours, the board heard from 20 people.

Scott Wells of Monterey, who had a long military and professional career in rescue services, said just because people are great paramedics doesn’t mean they are also good at management. He felt the county, in seeking a paid EMS chief, overlooked those within the county who had the skills to lead. He also questioned why the chief was allowed to take the fast response unit home at night, outside of Highland, instead of leaving it in the county. “He doesn’t deserve access to that and neither do you,” he said. “It’s not yours.”

He felt the chief lacked “fleet management” skills as well, and wasn’t good at making sure the vehicles were properly maintained.

Janice Warner of Monterey said she hoped the problems could be worked out. When the county bought the car wash building, that she said increased concerns. “That’s the worst thing done in this county in a long time,” she said. “It was underhanded … I believe we need both volunteers and paid people … I’d like to see an effort to work it out.”

Leo Schwartz of McDowell said the board failed to understand that residents are upset with officials who create more bureaucracy and throw money at problems. “I’ve lost faith in all three of you and your ability to govern. I’m upset. Step back; stop; sell the building; we don’t need that building. Let the volunteers work this out. Stop interfering politically. Let the volunteers run their own rescue squads and fire departments, or you’re going to end up with no rescue squad.”

A newer resident said he had moved here five years ago because of Highland’s conservative tax policy, and he hated to see more than $100,000 in salaries be paid to employees who do not live in the county. He felt hired staff should be made to relocate to the county within six months of getting the job. “The county volunteers who live here make our safety their personal responsibility,” he said. “And they know the roads better.”

Paul Trible of Blue Grass spoke on behalf of HCVRS as its president. He noted the squad had volunteered to pay for an attorney to help mediate details of a new MOU, but instead, the county hired its own attorney and “he crafted what the county wants.”

Trible said HCVRS never asked the paid staff to leave its building. “They went dancing out,” he said. Tensions between volunteers and paid staff centered around what the volunteers felt was a disrespect for the squad’s equipment and building. “He couldn’t take out the trash,” he said of the chief. “It may sound petty, but we expect good behavior, and it caused friction.” Furthermore, he said, paid staff made disrespectful comments about the volunteers, including about his wife, Debbie.

Then, he said, HCVRS found out the county had applied for grant money to purchase its own ambulance — a grant the squad was also applying for. Then, neither the county nor the squad got the grant. He noted the board had hired more staff, bought a building, and now was trying to get an ambulance. “If that isn’t trying to sideline us, I don’t know what is,” he said.

He also pointed out that with paid staff running all the calls, volunteers have trouble maintaining their credentials because they can’t respond to enough of them. He said the squad was concerned the county’s next step would be to take all the revenue recovery money, which is currently funneled to HCVRS, and starve the squad of cash. “The county wants career staff to take over control and have the volunteers fund-raise. But we’re not in this for bake sales, folks. We’re not.”

Trible said HCVRS wants paid staff to fill out a basic application to the squad for associate membership, so that when they use the squad’s building and equipment, they’d follow its procedures and policies. “We don’t think it’s too much to ask,” he said, that paid staff take out the trash, and wash ambulances.

He then held up a letter and motioned toward Sheriff David Neil.

“If this ordinance passes tonight, we’ve voted to stop all volunteer response, effective tonight, Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad would suspend operation,” he said. “There’s no reason we got to this point; we all know each other. Harry, you’ve known my wife for years … you’re following a pied piper.

“We can work with the deputy chief,” he added. “I’ve worked with him in the field. Carl (Williams) shows up. If you’ve gone over the mountain (in an accident), you’d better pray Carl’s on duty.”

Trible urged further negotiations with the county. “Let’s get together one more time. Delay the ordinance decision for a month and let’s talk one more time.”

A newer resident who had relocated from New York in December questioned the need for ordinance language that described violations as misdemeanors punishable by law. “How do you do that to volunteers?” he asked. “That’s not right.”

Henry Budzinski said he had sought the facts from supervisors and volunteers. “The information conflicts and contradicts,” he said. The only thing they agree on is that when an emergency call is answered, volunteers and paid staff work very well together, he said. He urged the board to hold a public work session to help residents understand the history of the situation, purpose of the car wash, tax implications, and costs involved.

Jim Blagg of McDowell said he read the proposed ordinance and pointed out it gives the EMS chief authority over the squads to run them as he sees fit. He, too, opposed the language about violations being punishable as misdemeanors. “How many volunteer organizations would continue under these conditions?” he asked. “Civic organizations and volunteerism is dying in rural areas and you want to hasten its demise.”

Lee Blagg, also of McDowell, told supervisors about one winter when someone fell, and his wife called two of the volunteers who lived nearby, who arrived in a few minutes to assess the situation and keep him comfortable until an ambulance got there. “You can’t do away with that,” he said.

Steve Fullerton noted he was on the committee a few years ago to take a look at the options for EMS services. “One of the things we discussed was the importance of leadership,” he said. And that is the current problem, he said — a failure of leadership, communication, and organization. “You guys are to blame for that,” he said, urging the board to reconsider.

Carol Bandy of Blue Grass read the oath of office each supervisor swore to when they were elected, to impartially discharge their duties and be unbiased. She said buying the car wash and taxing residents for EMS services was not being impartial.

Vickie King of Vanderpool told the board its current plan isn’t working and it needed a new one. She pointed out the virtual meetings held by the board during the pandemic made it harder for citizens to stay involved and provide input on the matter. “We need to work together … let’s get some really good input,” she said.

Mary Schooler of Blue Grass, a retired veteran EMT with HCVRS, noted she, her husband, and her son had long been involved. She asked other volunteers to stand and be recognized. Then she asked those who’d been served by HCVRS to stand. “Was it a comfort to be served by someone you know?” she asked them, to a resounding “yes” from the crowd.

She noted she was on the committee that interviewed and hired the EMS chief and deputy chief, and they interviewed well, but turned out not to be good leaders.

“The volunteer squad really did need the help,” she added. “But now the two (paid) people became five, and now you’re looking for a sixth.” She urged the board to reconsider, and to think about citizens who are on a fixed income. She quoted scripture and added, “Be the peacemakers for your county.”

Kenny Hodges of McDowell said he was the man Lee Blagg described who had fallen, and noted the county was blessed to have its volunteers. “These are trained people,” he said, “and it’s hard to have someone come over the top of you.”

Debbie Trible, HCVRS captain, was in Blacksburg that night for an EMS training seminar, but called her husband, Paul, and asked him to read a statement, which he did. Mrs. Trible said discussions with the county seemed to be wasted, as county leaders continued to fail to listen well enough to rectify the situation.

She noted one past supervisor complained that HCVRS didn’t have a duty roster. HCVRS is not the military, she said. “We are small, with limited manpower and limited funds. We do it because we love our county.”

She said the paid EMS chief was not interested in helping, but was instead leaving the work to everyone else.

Sherry Sullenberger of Mill Gap questioned how the county would pay for its EMS department when there’s a declining population. She pointed out that neighboring counties do not have paid squads, even though they have far more residents. “The volunteer rescue squad asked for help; they did not ask for a complete rescue or to be taken over,” she said.

Board responds

After the hearing was closed, supervisor David Blanchard thanked those attending. He acknowledged the situation was confusing.

“Those were good comments and they did not fall on deaf ears,” he said. “We care about the safety and well-being of all citizens. We didn’t enter into this willingly; we were asked to do something.”

Blanchard stressed the board has no interest in driving out the volunteer squad. “We just want to make sure all calls are answered.”

Sponaugle noted only one EMT who lived in Highland had applied for the paid position. “Nobody here with paramedic experience applied,” he said. “And it was advertised. We did what we could do, but you can’t ask paramedics to move here.”

He also pointed out labor laws restrict how many hours the paid staff can work, and that taking the vehicle home was part of the EMS chief’s contract.

He then asked how many HCVRS volunteers actively run calls. Shouting from the back of the room, volunteer member Kristie Moyers said there were 12. Invited to step to the podium, she listed several of them, and the number of years they’d served, many of them more than 20.

She pointed out, too, that sometimes volunteer drivers are turned down by the paid staff on a call.

“How are we supposed to get our hours and credentials if we can’t run calls?” she demanded. “The chief turned a volunteer away just three days ago.”

Moyers said there is roughly one call per day on average, and now the paid staff is on duty 24/7. “We (volunteers) need 10 calls a year to stay current,” she explained.

As her voice rose in anger, Sponaugle said it was time to close the hearing.

Supervisor John Moyers made a motion to table the matter and review the concerns expressed.

The board voted unanimously to do that, and continued the meeting to June 29.

**Emergency Medical Services in Highland: A look back**

June 24, 2021

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — One thing was clear in last Wednesday’s hearing about the Highland County’s proposed EMS ordinance: Many residents were unclear about its background.

Those who have been in Highland County fewer than 10 years would easily be confused. Given the length of time it’s taken for the county to reach this point, it’s understandable that longtime residents also may have forgotten what happened so many years ago.

So here’s a look back on the lengthy process Highland leaders and volunteers undertook to establish paid EMS staff, and why.

The Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad was chartered in 1963 with 15 members, using a refurbished hearse to transport patients until an ambulance was secured.

In 1971, the county provided land for the squad’s existing building; at this time, the squad had 17 members answering about 65 calls a year.

Skip ahead to 2009, and the squad had grown to 35 members answering about 200 calls a year, and started discussing the need for a new building. Modern, bigger ambulances had gotten harder to accommodate, and more room was needed. It would take years of fundraising to get enough money for a new building, but the squad was determined.

A timeline

• December 2012 — Chris Vernovai of Head Waters, a firefighter and paramedic with the former Navy base at Sugar Grove, W.Va., becomes HCVRS captain, after serving on the squad since 2006.

• February 2013 — Dr. Asher Brand, regional medical director, first suggests exploring the need for paid staff, particularly those trained in Advanced Life Support, and urged the county to look into using “revenue recovery” to pay for it. Revenue recovery is the process by which EMS bills a patient’s insurance to capture the costs associated with treatment and transportation. At this point, Capt. Vernovai has managed to recruit 11 new squad members.

• May 2013 — HCVRS asks the county for land to erect a new building; Vernovai presents architectural plans, and discussions on obtaining land begin.

• December 2013 — Internal tensions at the squad had been brewing, and membership retention was a problem. Vernovai asks the county for help.

• February 2014 — Vernovai reports a severe shortage of volunteers able to answer calls, particularly during working hours, and the squad and county begin to consider some hybrid of paid and volunteer staff. Anyone with a scanner was painfully aware that calls for help were going unanswered, sometimes for upwards of an hour; sometimes not answered at all. Dispatch was often calling Augusta County EMS for assistance. Ultimately, Augusta’s personnel tells the county it cannot not keep answering calls for nothing, and proposes charging $1,000 per call to Highland. Alarmed by this, supervisors begin talking about enacting a new fee on residents to help cover costs.

EMS improvement, decline

• May 2014 — The county instead decides to hire an EMS coordinator. The position was to include coordinating daily EMS responses as an intermediate level EMT or preferably, a paramedic. The job included coordinating all EMS with the HCVRS, all fire departments, the sheriff’s office, and other medical personnel. This person was to maintain a schedule to ensure calls were covered 24/7, and assist HCVRS with training, volunteer incentives, vehicle maintenance, revenue recovery, budgeting, and grant opportunities. Vernovai gets the job, and all seems to go well; call responses improve.

• August 2015 — Vernovai begins payouts for an incentive program, and the county approves a designated emergency response agency agreement that provides for the EMS coordinator and HCVRS to serve as responders. New EMTs are trained and added.

• April 2016 — By this year, internal tensions rise again, and citizens complain during the county budget process. Then- HCVRS president Todd Brendel responded to what he labeled as “attacks” on the squad and Vernovai. “Since the county approved the position and hiring of Chris Vernovai to emergency (medical) services coordinator, the squad has dramatically improved … Chris has not only met the job requirements assigned by the county but has performed well beyond what’s expected by having the highest volume of calls answered by anyone in the squad, oftentimes after working his normal eight-hour shift.” Squad Captain Jed Thomas agrees. The squad answers an average of 265 calls a year, he said, and responses have gone up dramatically since 2013. “We would not have a squad today if it weren’t for Chris Vernovai,” he said. Squad member Aareon Murray says, “We were on the verge of collapse. Chris Vernovai took over and from day two, things started getting better.” He noted some volunteers had their memberships rejected, but the members choose the members, not the EMS coordinator. Things seem to settle down again for a while.

• April 2017 — Vernovai now reports that fewer than 1 percent of rescue calls went unanswered the previous year, down from 20 percent three years ago. But finding money to pay for rising training costs was a challenge, and new recruits were often deterred when they learned they must go to the valley for training. Vernovai focuses on making training available locally, which helps some, but over the course of coming months, retention and response time issues resurface.

• November 2017 — Supervisors hold a public input meeting to get ideas on how to proceed; citizens and squad members voice concerns about response times, the cost involved in hiring paid staff, and the impacts of a countywide fee imposed to cover those expenses. All seem to agree, however, the county needs to move in that direction, and suggest a committee be formed to take a look at the options.

• January 2018 — County creates an EMS citizens committee to help explore the challenges, headed by the late Paul Klein, with HCVRS’ Kristie Siron as secretary. They begin researching ways to improve the system, work that would continue for months. Sen. Creigh Deeds introduces Senate Bill 680 to authorize Highland to impose a fee to support EMS.

• May 2018 — Klein outlines possibilities for the county to consider, including a stronger incentive program for volunteers; hiring paramedics and EMTs; or hiring a company like Lifecare to provide everything. It was noted it would take $300-$400 per household to support a full-time EMS staff. Discussion ensued about where revenue recovery funds should go. Complaints emerge that Vernovai is managing with a “heavy hand.”

• July 2018 — The EMS committee reports its findings, looking at three options: all volunteer EMS, a mix of volunteer and paid; or all paid staff. The committee has interviewed citizens, providers, professional EMS managers; and met with county residents and the Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad. “These have not always been pleasant conversations, but they have been productive. Unfortunately, some squad members felt the squad was under attack when, actually, this committee was trying to find solutions to problems the squad hasn’t seemed to be able to resolve on its own,” Klein said at the time. One of the committee’s recommendations was that supervisors establish an independent, permanent citizens review committee responsible for setting policy, auditing funds, and recommending hiring and firing of paid squad members. Committee members differed in what path to follow. Siron at the time favored a combined paid and volunteer squad, after hearing the preference of squad members to move in that direction. Member Steve Fullerton leaned toward a combined paid-volunteer squad, but said managing that will take a special person and multiple years of effort.

Staff changes

• September 2018 — Vernovai is offered and accepts a new job elsewhere, resigning as EMS coordinator. The county regroups, and begins a search.

• January 2019 — The county hires Adam Gillispie of Bath County as new EMS chief, and Carl Williams of Brandywine, W.Va., as deputy chief. The hire was made after a full review and interview process conducted by a committee consisting of Klein, Siron, Fullerton, Hooke, Dr. Brand, Ronald Wimer, Nancy Witschey, Roberta Lambert, supervisor Harry Sponaugle, and Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad members Mary Schooler and Debbie Trible. Gillispie is a nationally registered paramedic, and graduate of Alleghany High School. He had been a paramedic with Waynesboro First Aid Crew, a paramedic for Carilion Clinic, Lexington, and a paramedic with the Millboro Area Rescue Squad from 2013-15.

• April 2019 — Supervisors prepare to devote substantially more resources to EMS. They propose a 4-cent real estate tax rate hike, and a 25-cent personal property tax increase. “We just have to get public input and remind people this is propping up the rescue squad,” supervisor David Blanchard said at the time, about the newly formed EMS department. The roughly $260,000 proposed allocation for the department was the largest hike by far in the county budget.

• May 2019 — Klein publicly expresses concern that calls are still getting slow response times, despite having the two paid EMS personnel.

• June 2019 — County approves request to authorize Bolar Volunteer Rescue Squad as an EMS agency.

• October 2019 — County approves a policy to keep continuity in EMS, particularly in education, at Gillispie’s request. The county creates a Department of Emergency Medical Services as an agency to serve as an umbrella for whatever volunteer organization is authorized to operate, more or less under Gillispie. At the time, county attorney Melissa Dowd said the policy was not designed to have Gillispie directly supervise the volunteers, but rather, designed in a way he could make sure all personnel at both squads know who has what kind of training, communication lines are maintained, and there’s no redundancy of effort. The EMS chief was responsible for establishing policies to ensure volunteer agencies provide consistent, quality care; and communicating with all EMS agencies to ensure compliance with the policies. It stated explicitly that the chief had no authority to directly supervise any volunteers, but was authorized to take whatever actions necessary to remedy any agency failure to comply.

Things unravel

• January 2020 — County adopts revised EMS policy.

• March 2020 — The coronavirus pandemic leaves rescue personnel focused on coordinating efforts for infected patients, and other rescue calls ease up for months as people are mostly staying at home.

• October 2020 — The county buys the former car wash building at auction for $180,000, with plans to house the paid EMS staff there, and Paul Trible strongly objects, speaking for himself. The county struggles to adequately craft the new EMS fee charged to residents, which causes an uproar.

• November 2020 — Volunteers try to begin resolving concerns. A newly formed EMS Committee discusses how to change the structure of the system. By changing the structure, “we can prevent a lot of problems going forward,” said Dr. Brand at the time, noting if there are two people serving as chiefs, that presents built-in conflicts. With a new structure with a single chief and board of directors, a lot of problems go away, Brand explained. “In my experience with volunteer and paid systems, it doesn’t make sense to have two leaders. I think the problems we’ve seen recently are because of that,” Brand said. Brand presented two structures — one led by county government and the other led by a board of directors. Debbie Trible says the main difficulty with that model is the government would run it, not the citizens. A director-led model would make it easier to get grants, Brand said. A government-led model would carry the advantage of employee benefits. “Both agencies need to work together, and they have to be combined,” said Paul Trible. “We need each other,” Gillispie agrees. Talks among county supervisors, EMS paid staff, and HCVRS continue privately, but are unsuccessful in resolving tensions, particularly after the county proposes a new EMS ordinance — the one currently under consideration.

• December 2020 — HCVRS requests the return of its fast-response vehicle, and that paid staff remove all personal property from its building since they were now using the car wash building.

• January 2021 — Supervisors hear objections from HCVRS about the proposed ordinance; the squad’s fears the county’s moves will bring an end to the viability of the volunteer squad. “Highland County cannot afford to operate an all-paid EMS service,” Paul Trible tells the board. “Also true: HCVRS volunteers cannot respond to every call. This means the ongoing partnership between HCEMS (the county EMS department) and HCVRS is essential for affordable, reliable EMS service in Highland County … It is HCVRS’ belief the county’s proposed EMS ordinance makes this partnership impossible for two reasons: first, the ordinance threatens HCVRS’ sustainability by depriving it of the insurance-based revenue funding HCVRS earns on many of its calls. Secondly, due to hostility the HCEMS leadership has shown toward HCVRS, putting HCVRS volunteers under the current chief threatens their ongoing willingness to serve, he says. “Conceptually we can understand and agree with a single chain of command, but our experience with the county’s current HCEMS leadership, and the county’s refusal to address issues, has convinced us that current command would result in the collapse of EMS services … We do not oppose working under the authority of a paid chief, just not the current paid leadership.” Matt Ratcliffe of the Bolar Volunteer Fire Department and Rescue Squad criticizes what he termed “mudslinging” and praises the advances in EMS. “Today you know someone will answer when you call 911. That wasn’t true four years ago.”

MOU threatened

• February 2021 — Because Virginia follows the federal EMS approach based on a chain of command, the county determines there can be only one countywide “chief” for EMS. HCVRS gives notice of its intent to revoke the MOU by May — a move that left the county worried about losing access to the HCVRS facilities, vehicles and equipment it used under the terms of the MOU. In its notice, HCVRS proposed county paid staff fall under HCVRS policies and chain of command while in its building. The county said that was impossible because those were county employees who report only to the board. Subsequently, it drafts the proposed ordinance to establish a coordinated system under the command of the EMS chief. The ordinance language says the two volunteer squads would retain full authority to operate under their own organizational charts and bylaws, but must comply with state regulations, the ordinance itself, and the policies created by the chief for the coordinated system. HCVRS later extends its May deadline on the MOU for another 60 days as negotiations continue.

• April 2021 — Supervisor David Blanchard presents HCVRS with another proposal — an advisory committee comprised of the chief, as executive member; a chief operational officer from each volunteer agency, the operational medical director (same for all agencies), and the county administrator.

(See sidebar for details).

• Tuesday, June 15 — Paul Trible sends an email to the board the day before last week’s hearing, providing supervisors with two options, and reminding them, “We intend to re-title all units in HCVRS’ name only, pay off our emergency fund note due the county, and essentially eliminate any connection between HCVRS and county government … All of our officers believe this is the best path forward.”

Options presented

The last-minute proposal Trible sent to the board included items such as:

• The EMS ordinance be removed from consideration until after current supervisors’ terms end or if HCVRS disbands. “We are unwilling to continue fighting the same fight repeatedly,” it states.

• HCVRS officers manage volunteer staff; EMS chief and deputy chief manage paid staff.

• Deputy chief and HCVRS captain meet monthly. “HCVRS representatives will not meet with the current chief under any circumstances,” it says.

• A new MOU to be crafted at the first meeting.

• All joint policy/procedural changes require joint approval.

• All apparatus to be owned by HCVRS. No county owned apparatus, absent written consent from HCVRS, or HCVRS votes to dissolve.

• County agrees to sell car wash.

• HCVRS will seek to build a new, simple ambulance bay facility adjacent to the current administration building. Once built, HCVRS will seek to sell the current ambulance bays and the county will not object to those funds flowing to HCVRS to help pay for the new ambulance bays.

• The deputy chief will have an office in the administration building. “The county can locate the current chief wherever they like. He is not welcome in our facilities,” is says. “All other HCEMS employees will be allowed to use our facilities, provided they follow basic guidelines for tidiness and general housekeeping.”

• Highland County will assist HCVRS with building financing if HCVRS deems necessary.

• The county and HCVRS shall craft a pro-rata formula for sharing revenue recovery funds.

• An EMS advisory board created to facilitate cooperation. Board recommendations will be non-binding but all parties will be expected to give board recommendations full consideration. Board will consist of two members appointed by the HCVRS, two members appointed by Highland County, and one member appointed by BVRS. All board members must be residents of Highland.

• Should HCVRS vote to cease operations, it will donate or lease two equipped ambulances to the county.

Option No. 2 was simply: If the EMS ordinance passes, HCVRS suspends all volunteer 911 EMS operations in Highland immediately, and if the county is not already in possession of an ambulance, HCVRS will provide one to Highland County until the MOU extension expires.

**Rescue squad, county, make progress on EMS**

July 08, 2021

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — “I’m more hopeful than I ever have been,” said Paul Trible, Highland County Volunteer Rescue Squad president.

Tuesday, Highland County supervisor David Blanchard said as tough as recent meetings between the county and HCVRS members have been, “it’s important to have those discussions, and let citizens vent their frustrations.”

The county and HCVRS have been at odds for months about how the new county paid EMS staff affects the fate of the volunteer squad, which has provided EMS services for decades in Highland.

“It was good to hear from everyone,” added supervisor Harry Sponaugle. “Hopefully, we can come up with a new plan.”

Over a week ago, HCVRS rejected a revised EMS ordinance proposed by the county for a second time. Monday, Blanchard and HCVRS personnel met again, and seemed to have made a great deal of forward progress.

“I want to thank David for meeting with us,” Trible told supervisors Tuesday. “Last night, I became more hopeful than I ever have been in 18 months.” HCVRS volunteers and county supervisors were both beaten down enough that I think we’ll find a good solution. We’re all weary of this,” he said, telling the board that volunteers will have “something for you later this week.”

HCVRS is revisiting an advisory committee idea first presented by Blanchard in April, and working through parts the squad and county can agree on, and negotiating the parts where they disagree.

“We need volunteers,” Trible added. “David, as you said, if we could get 10, 5 percent of the people at these meetings to help, that would be something. If you have a skill set the rescue squad could use, please help us. We may end up with a paid squad in the end, but at least we’ll be able to say we tried.”

Blanchard explained he had met with the HCVRS board, having “discussions coming off a hot meeting” previously.

“We put a lot of things on the table,” he said. “We want to see where we can get talking to one another, verses talking at one another.”

The county and HCVRS expect a number of written exchanges to take place as negotiations continue.

Blanchard said they might end up with a revised EMS ordinance, building off the currently proposed document and making serious tweaks that need to be made. “Or we might come out with a brand new document,” he said. He noted the idea of an advisory committee seemed to be something citizens agreed with, to start with as a foundation.

Trible added, “We are finding a way to the ultimate goal — one team, one set of apparatus, one set of buildings, one set of policies.”

Following Tuesday’s board meeting, Trible said the county and HCVRS could be under one umbrella, but until now, each entity had been getting conflicting information that made discussions tough.

“We had a good break-through last night,” he told The Recorder.

“We said, you know, we’re Highland County. We can do this.”