CARMEL - Putnam legislators have rejected a request for more money to keep the county's private ambulance service on the job after Oct. 1, a move the county executive and other officials say could put lives at risk.

"The Legislature doesn't want the program to end," said Legislature Chairman Dan Birmingham, R-Brewster. "We want it to continue in a fiscally responsible manner."

Legislators want the county to look for cheaper ways to provide advanced life support, including seeking a new service.

But County Executive Robert Bondi and Putnam's Bureau of Emergency Services officials say there isn't enough time to complete a formal process to replace Empire State Ambulance Corp. by Oct. 1.

Putnam paid Empire $485,000 for one year for two ambulances and two paramedic-staffed "fly cars," which carry medical equipment but do not provide transport.

Empire was to receive $504,000 in the second year of its contract, but spokesman Dan Roberts said the company can't afford to do the job for less than $950,000 and has opted out of the contract.

By a 7-1 vote Aug. 7, the Putnam Legislature rejected an appeal from the administration for an additional $116,250 for Empire through Dec. 31.

Legislator Sam Oliverio, D-Putnam Valley, the lone voice to support funding, said his constituents had made "great use of the service" and ending it would "create an abrupt and unexpected gap."

But Legislator Terry Intrary, R-Kent, echoed the concerns of his colleagues when he accused Empire of low-balling its bid.

"They are holding us hostage," Intrary said. "We have to figure out another way to fund this." Roberts denied that Empire's request for more money had been premeditated.

"Prices are going up, and billing (for ambulance transport) has not covered expenses," he said. Patients taken to a hospital in an Empire ambulance get billed for the trip. Those taken by a volunteer ambulance do not pay for transport but are billed for any paramedic services Empire provides.
Bondi has included full funding for advanced life support and paramedic services in the 2008 county budget - which is already expected to carry a 20 percent tax-rate increase. The spending plan needs approval from the Legislature, which can amend individual spending lines.

"This is a service that people who live in areas not close to the two hospitals that serve Putnam County can't live without," said Bondi, an ambulance volunteer in Mahopac for 15 years.

Helga Klessen, 70, of Brewster said county residents become pawns each budget season as politicians threaten to eliminate needed services as they raise taxes. The county should explore ways to control the cost of advanced life support, but cutting it out is not an option, she said. Robert Cuomo, the county's emergency medical services director, said that without ALS, patients no longer would receive intravenous therapy or medications for heart or asthma attacks until they reach a hospital.

Empire was hired in September 2006 to reduce response times during business hours, which had risen to as much as 30 minutes. Since last year, countywide response times have dropped to less than 11 minutes, Cuomo said.

The ambulance service is provided in the eastern part of the county, where there is a shortage of volunteers during the workweek.

Legislators suggested several options the administration could initiate before Oct. 1. They include seeking a new provider, seeking arrangements with nearby hospitals or asking towns to help pay.

A scathing state audit in July criticized Putnam's purchasing practices, urging the county to use a formal bidding process for professional services, even though it is not required by law. The request for bids that drew Empire was informal.

"This Ouija board bidding has got to stop," Birmingham said.

Cuomo said four ambulance companies have state licenses to serve Putnam, and only two responded to the county's request. Empire's bid was lower, he said.

Cuomo said that without funding the service would end Oct. 1.

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