Ambulance corps shutdown leaves residents anxious

By Simon Shifrin

Times Herald-Record - December 20, 2007

Otisville — Otisville and Mount Hope residents face stark options in coming months with the shutdown this week of their volunteer ambulance corps.

Regional EMS of Middletown, a nonprofit, has taken over as the primary life support provider in the town and village for the time being. But under the current arrangement, Regional's response times in the area can range from five to 25 minutes depending on the weather, the location of ambulances and the location of the call, said Mike Witkowski, Regional's Orange County chief of operations, speaking at a brainstorming meeting last night at Mount Hope Town Hall.

Rescuers talk about the "golden hour," he said, where a trauma victim has about an hour to get to the hospital to have the best chance of survival. "What you're doing right now is basically playing Russian roulette," he said. "What's best for this town is to guarantee subsidized service, guarantee your residents an ambulance response." That would mean that the town and village would hire Regional, or another EMS company, to staff a full-time ambulance in the town. That could cost taxpayers more than $300,000 or about $200 per year per $100,000 of assessed property value, officials estimated last night.

Before this week's shutdown of the volunteer ambulance corps, Regional had already become the de facto life support provider in the area. With its eight volunteers, the local corps had only been staffing one 12-hour shift per week. In the late 1990s, the corps had a full crew of 20-30 volunteers who would respond to calls 24 hours every day, said Capt. Dan Dodd.

But demands have grown on EMTs in recent years, with certification requirements and the time spent on calls. And the corps was operating on a shoestring budget of $33,000 per year.

Since 1983, the corps operated out of a closet in the cramped Otisville firehouse, which also maintains a bay for one ambulance. With no crew quarters, volunteers had to respond to calls from home. And just to use the bathroom at the firehouse, they had to have a special key.

Dodd said it's a "miracle" the corps survived as long as it did. "It's hard to run your business out of somebody else's closet," he said.

sshifrin@th-record.com