Board vote keeps Colonie EMS program flying for now

Board met late into the night before voting for extension through end of year; review to follow

By JIMMY VIELKIND, Staff writer
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COLONIE -- After over a month of rancorous debate, the Town Board voted Thursday to extend a program that allows town paramedics to provide emergency services on State Police helicopters.

A majority of the seven-member board had expressed its support for an extension at the end of a four-hour public hearing attended by more than 100 people.

The extension, which came late Thursday, calls for keeping the program in the air through the end of this year. After that, a financial review of operations will be done before considering another extension, officials said.

A dozen people -- including a doctor, the town's EMS medical director, a union representative, Albany County Comptroller Mike Conners and several paramedics -- spoke in favor of continuing the program, which has run since 1993. Town Supervisor Paula Mahan canceled the program in July, citing cost, liability and a need to focus services within the town.

``I hear the passion,'' Mahan said. ``I think it's the right thing to do, because I've heard your cares loud and clear.''

The standing-room-only crowd reacted with tepid joy at the results of the vote. Earlier, the program's supporters voiced support and longtime-paramedic Jack Moser offered a 20-minute presentation about the program's benefits: it allows for a higher level of training and care, benefits town residents who suffer major injuries within Colonie and, they say, provided over $150,000 of net revenue in 2007.

``It's the experience that I gained out there that's going to help me do a better job helping you,'' Moser said to applause. Another supporter later presented the board with 1,500 petitions in favor of extending the program.

Ken Dott, who has been a paramedic in Colonie for nearly 20 years, put it more bluntly:

``Because of this program, we have saved lives,'' he said. ``We're not talking about pennies here. We save lives.

That's what's inside of us, that's what we're born and bred to do. And we have documented instances of how we've saved lives because of this program.''

Town Attorney Mike Magguilli laid out his own costs, which included over $289 per hour for personnel and $32,000 in overhead for equipment. Exactly how many hours were worked was not available, he said, because independent
tracking of the hours worked has not been in place.

"It's sort of like having another unfunded state mandate, and we primarily benefit residents of other towns," Magguilli said. In the event of an accident, he added, the town would be liable for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars. He said the state refused to assume that liability, and noted a lawsuit against the State Police is pending in Rochester for operating a similar program, claiming it unfairly competes with private enterprise.

The resolution provides for the extension of service at least through the end of the year. The town's withdrawal from the program would have taken effect September 1.

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