Vote due on copter rescues

Colonie could decide tonight on extending deal with State Police

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COLONIE — Town paramedics may avoid grounding for at least another year.

The Town Board could vote as soon as tonight to extend Colonie's partnership in an elite State Police helicopter medical rescue program through the end of 2009, as auditors continue to study whether the program makes the town money.

But the proposed contract will come with new conditions.

The changes include a requirement that the flights be restricted to emergency medical evacuations, that they remain within the 100-mile radius stipulated in the contract and that the town be absolved of liability if the contract is exceeded, said Town Attorney Michael Magguilli.

Colonie's participation in the Lifeguard Air Rescue Program was supposed to end later this month after Supervisor Paula Mahan in July said the town would pull out of the 15-year partnership amid concerns about cost, safety and liability.

The program, based out of Albany International Airport in Latham, pairs paid Colonie medics with State Police
flight crews for critical medical rescue missions throughout the greater Capital Region.

The state doesn't pay the town, but in return for providing professional flight-trained medics to staff the missions, Colonie can bill patients for its medics' services.

The decision to pull out angered many in the ranks of the town's Emergency Medical Services Department, who — organized by their union, the United Public Service Employees Union — turned out in force to protest.

Former patients who said they owed their lives to the program and former members of the State Police aviation unit also petitioned the board to reconsider. The partnership was first slated to end Sept. 1 before the Town Board extended it to year's end.

Among the questions raised by Mahan were whether the program actually makes the town money. EMS and union officials have said it does, prompting it the Town Board to commission its auditing firm, BST, to review EMS finances related to the program.

That audit, however, is not complete, leading to the proposed extension.

Magguilli said the proposed contract amendments stem in part from the auditors' early findings. The changes would also prohibit EMS workers' family members from riding the helicopter and prohibit medics from riding in the pilot or co-pilot's seat during flights, Magguilli said.

It's not clear how troopers will respond to the proposed amendments.

Sgt. Kern Swoboda, a State Police spokesman, declined to comment on any action the board may take but acknowledged that the agency has begun drafting a request for proposals should Colonie opt out.

Work on that, he said, began earlier this year when the future of the partnership came into doubt.

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