DURHAM — Rick Vanderbeck, president of the Durham Volunteer Ambulance Squad, presented the group's budget to the town board and the news is not good.

Because of longtime problems attracting and retaining volunteers, the organization may be forced to change its structure.

“The bottom line,” Vanderbeck said, “is that Durham will eventually have to go to paid service.”

While Durham Ambulance has tried several strategies to increase membership and encourage recruitment over the past few months, including implementation of a gas card policy which provides gas money for volunteers, it’s still a tough go.

“We are working on improving manpower,” Vanderbeck said. "Six of the 18 students enrolled in the current EMT class are our recruits. Although many of these are from outside the area they have expressed a willingness to serve here.”

But most of the recruits will not graduate and be ready for service until the spring of 2010.

Just five years ago Durham had up to 35 active members and covered more than 200 calls annually with few turnovers.

Now there are just 14 active members in the squad and the average monthly turnover rate is roughly 30 percent.

The problem is not so much interest and dedication as financial issues revolving around jobs and income.

“People can’t afford to take these volunteer positions unless they’re millionaires with extra time on their hands,” Vanderbeck said. “With the economy as tough as it is, people who at one time might have been able to volunteer are working two and three jobs.”

In general, ambulance squads are responsible for answering up to 85 percent of all calls coming in from the control center.

In any given year, a local fire company might answer 40-50 calls in comparison to 200-300 handled by a local ambulance squad.

“Monday and Thursday are our toughest days,” Vanderbeck said. “Many volunteers work outside the area and that’s when our ranks are weakest.”

The town board seemed blindsided by Vanderbeck’s stark assessment and the squad’s proposed budget seeking double its 2009 contract.

“We are taken aback by this,” Councilwoman Jodi West said. “It’s not something we expected.”
But Vanderbeck responded, "Look at the towns around us. Windham was the first to go to a paid service. Then it was Cairo, Catskill and Coxsackie. It's just a matter of time until Durham follows suit."

"The board shouldn't be surprised," Assistant Chief Greg Koerner-Fox said. "We have been discussing the problem since January."

While the squad is still considering other incentives to improve staffing issues including a pager fee and a transport stipend, those details have yet to be worked out.

Vanderbeck said the estimated cost for 24/7 paid service in Cairo is close to $450,000 and full-time paid ambulance service for Durham could approach that level.

He also updated the Board on the ambulance response rate in September. "We had 22 calls, 3 turnovers, 2 RMA (refused medical assistance) and the rest were transport," he said.

The Squad's vehicles are in good condition. The 2004 ambulance has 42,000 miles and the 2000 model has 70,000 miles.

But Vanderbeck said they would like to start a fund for a new ambulance costing roughly $107,000.00 in the next few years.

Local fire companies also presented their proposed budgets to the town board at the workshop meeting.

The East Durham Volunteer Fire Department projected a need for $99,888 in funding for 2010, and the Oak Hill Fire Department presented a proposed budget of $97,200.

The Town Board will hold a series of budget workshops in the next several weeks to discuss these and other issues.