Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the city will add more ambulances if private hospitals decide to stop providing ambulance service because of a new fee the city plans to impose. But the mayor on Thursday predicted that the hospitals will pay up because they would stand to lose patients and revenue if they get out of the ambulance business.

The Fire Department handles roughly 63% of the ambulance tours in the five boroughs, while 25 private hospitals account for the remainder. Beginning in January 2012, the city plans to charge these hospitals as much as $1 million to participate in the city’s 911 system.

Medical professionals said the new fee will create an enormous financial burden on already-struggling hospitals. Some officials predicted hospitals would no longer volunteer ambulance services.

But Bloomberg remained skeptical that private hospitals would stop providing ambulance service. “I don’t think that’s the case,” he said Thursday in response to a question from The Journal. “But if we have that extra revenue and they go out of the ambulance business, we’ll add more ambulances to the FDNY.”

“The bottom line is that they like these ambulances to pick up patients because that’s the way they fill the beds. And they generally don’t pay themselves,” he added. “They pass on the cost to insurance companies or to one of the federal programs.”

The mayor suggested it’s unfair for city taxpayers to pay 100% of the costs of 911 dispatch services when only 63% of the ambulance runs are operated by the city.
"All we’re saying is we just can’t afford to do that anymore. So, we’ve just got to spread the cost. And we’ll do that,” he said. “If they don’t want to have the patients in their hospitals, they won’t get ‘em,” said Bloomberg, referring to the possibility of hospitals no longer participating in the city’s 911 system. “But my suspicion is — because they need to fill those beds to make their budgets — they will (pay).”

Dr. Lewis Marshall, chairman of emergency medicine at Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center in Brooklyn, one of the institutions affected by the new city policy, questioned the mayor’s logic. If the city were to add ambulances and staff to make up for private hospitals dropping out, Marshall predicted it could cost the city more than the $8.7 million it hopes to save by charging this fee to the private hospitals.

“From a business standpoint I don’t know if that would make sense,” he said.