Endicott mayor stops fire crews from EMS calls

By: Janelle Burrell

Tensions continue to rise between the Village of Endicott and its fire department. The latest point of contention: The mayor's decision to stop the village's fire department from responding to EMS calls. The mayor says it's just business, but as our Janelle Burrell tells us, the firefighters' union believes it's a personal attack.

ENDICOTT, N.Y. -- It's another battle of the Endicott firefighters union versus the village's mayor. The sticking point this time, the mayor's decision to stop the firefighters from responding to EMS calls.

"You were hired as firefighters and you're going to be firefighter as far as I'm concerned," said Mayor John Bertoni.

"It's mayoral edict from the mayor and the union knows that this is retaliation," countered Local 1280 president Paul Higgins.

But mayor says the decision came after consultation with the fire chief and was a move to address staffing and finances.

Fire crews receive a stipend for their EMS work and about 70 percent of the department's calls are EMS related. With staffing at a new low, the administration wants to ensure crews are available for possible fires.

"We're at critical levels, and without these people, it's very difficult to get the people there we need," said Fire Chief Stephen Hrustich.

Right now the Village of Endicott chips in nearly $50,000 a year to help fund the union ambulance squad. But once the mayor's order takes effect, the squad will be responsible for answering all of the calls throughout the village.

The concern of the firefighters union is that because the squad is short staffed there will be a severe delay in response times.

"That ambulance, at times, is 20 minutes away," Higgins said. "The role of the modern fire department is life safety, be it a fire, entanglement in machinery or a medical issue."

"We don't want to put anyone in harm's way," said Bertoni. "What we want is we can have the same tragedy. The same travesty if I don't have enough manpower to fight a fire with."

The order will go into effect June 1st. The union is now seeking the support of village trustees to overrule Bertoni's decision.

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