Swan song for Greene’s last all-volunteer rescue squad?

By Brian Hubert For Hudson-Catskill Newspapers | Posted: Wednesday, June 5, 2013 1:15 am

GREENVILLE — It’s a scenario the Greenville Rescue Squad never wants to see: An ambulance call that can’t be answered because there are no available volunteers to dispatch the ambulance.

Out of 335 calls, this happened 66 times last year, forcing the rescue squad to seek out a mutual aid call to Coxsackie, Durham, or Cairo to respond to the call, Danielle Powell, Greenville Rescue Squad chief administrator, said. The Greenville Town Board has agreed to set up a two-person committee chaired by councilmen Richard Bear and Ken Stern to study the implementation of a paid system or hybrid system to staff the ambulance.

A paid system would make sure the ambulance is always available to go out on a call, Powell said.

An early estimate would see a part-time paid staff make approximately $10 per hour and work in 12 or 24 hours shifts each week, Powell said. “We don’t want to get into benefits and retirement.”

Powell estimates it would take approximately 18 people in two-person crews to fill all the shifts that need to be covered. This would cost approximately $225,000, Powell said.

“We would cover about two-thirds of the cost,” Powell said.

The rest of the cost of the paid staff would be passed on to town taxpayers.

Town Supervisor Paul Macko said something needs to be done about the rescue squad. “We don’t want our residents to go without services,” Macko said.

Macko and board considered setting up a district similar to a fire district. Macko estimated taxes would go up approximately $93 on a $100,000 house in the area covered by the district.

Powell plans to hold several meetings with the rescue squad’s attorney, Bear, Stern and the town’s attorney.

The Greenville Rescue Squad is the last all-volunteer rescue squad in the county, Powell said.

After 42 years, this era may come to an end as the Greenville Rescue Squad struggles to make ends meet. Last year the squad lost approximately $60,000 Powell said.

“We’re really hurting,” Powell said. “We work with a good billing agency. In Greenville we get all of our paperwork done.”

The squad is also finding increasingly hard to find volunteers in tough economic times, Powell said. “In these economic times EMS people want to get paid,” she said. She noted how adjacent towns that pay EMS people provide tough competition.
If the Greenville Rescue Squad switches to a paid system, it must find a new home, because the fire department will not be able to house a paid staff, Powell said.

The state Health Department has specific regulations for bathrooms and showers that the facilities at the firehouse can’t meet, forcing the squad to look at other options, Powell said.

The rescue squad is looking at options for housing the ambulance. Possible options include renting an apartment or considering buildings recommended by the town, she said.

A “hybrid system,” in which a paid staff ensures the ambulance is always staffed while volunteers come in to help out, is also being considered, Powell said.

“Down the road it will have to go to a paid system, but we would like to encourage volunteers to come in,” Powell said. “It will be difficult for our agency, because we only have one ambulance, but were willing to try the hybrid system to see if it can work for us.”

The board brought up concerns about the impact on the rescue squad from a contentious proposal that would see Greene County provide countywide ambulance service. She reassured the board that the plan for a countywide ambulance service is at least five to 10 years off. “It may not even happen,” Powell said.

One of the plans being considered would see the county provide one ambulance to serve the valley towns and one ambulance to serve the mountain towns, Powell said.

Powell is grateful the town is listening to her concerns. “We went to the town because we need help after 42 years,” she said. “We went to the town looking for help, and they were very receptive to our needs, and what the town needs. They’re willing to work with us, and we appreciate that more than anything.”

Charles Benninger, assistant chief of the Greenville Rescue Squad, said the paid system is the right thing to do. “It’s the right thing to do for the residents of our town.”

EMT Anthony Scirico also supports the proposal. “I think it’s something that needs to be done,” Scirico said. “The numbers speak for themselves.”