LOCKPORT – The cash-strapped city plans to auction off its two ambulances and to reduce Fire Department minimum staffing from nine firefighters per shift to six as of Sept. 15, Mayor Anne E. McCaffrey said Wednesday.

McCaffrey told the Common Council at a work session that the Fire Board had approved those moves Tuesday, as well as green-lighting the transfer of the city’s fire and emergency medical dispatching duties from the Police Department to the Niagara County Sheriff’s Office, effective at 7 a.m. Sept. 15.

That’s the date and time a private ambulance company will be taking over rescue calls in the city, the mayor said. McCaffrey said she and the Council “are in the final stages” of choosing which company that will be.

The actions come as the city awaits the signature of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on a bill to allow emergency borrowing of more than $5 million to keep Lockport from running out of money in September, as a state audit last week predicted.

The Council is to vote on the ambulance company selection and auctioning off the ambulances at its next formal meeting on Wednesday.

However, the outcome doesn’t appear to be in doubt, as the mayor announced a community meeting for 6 p.m. Sept. 9 in City Hall to answer the public’s questions about the new ambulance service. A representative from the ambulance company chosen, either Rural Metro or Twin City, will attend that meeting, McCaffrey said.

The ambulance company will not be paid by the city, officials have said. It will make money by billing people who are transported in the ambulances.

“I’m absolutely not surprised,” Lockport Professional Fire Fighters Association President Kevin W. Pratt said when told of the Fire Board’s actions. “The judge paved the way for this with his decision.”

He was referring to the June 25 ruling by State Supreme Court Justice Ralph A. Boniello III that canceled a restraining order preventing the city from cutting minimum manning in the Fire Department from nine to seven per shift.
McCaffrey said the city decided to go deeper than that, although she added, “We’ll be staffing it at more than six.” She wouldn’t say what the figure will be.

Pratt wasn’t fazed by the decision to sell the ambulances. He promised city residents last month that the union would win an arbitration case and get the ambulance service restored.

“They can go out and buy more. These need to be replaced anyway,” Pratt said.

The city is avoiding the need to buy two new ambulances next year for a total of about $300,000.

The city budgets about $600,000 a year in revenue for ambulance billing, but McCaffrey said last week it costs about $1 million to provide the service, counting salaries, overtime and operating expenses.

McCaffrey’s reasoning on minimum manning is that without ambulance calls, fewer men are needed.

“Right now, we have nine men (per shift),” McCaffrey said. “If an ambulance goes out, three guys go with it, and we have six (at the firehouse). That happens 10 times a day. When two ambulances are out, we have only three firemen in the city.”

With the new moves, there will be at least six men to respond to a fire. As for medical needs at a fire, Fire Board member and Alderman Patrick W. Schrader said, “We will have BLS on the fire truck, which is basic life support.”

“If there’s a fire, the ambulance company will go to the fire,” McCaffrey said. “We will pay zero.”

The county dispatching of Lockport fire and ambulance calls won’t cost the city anything except $300 to $400 for some telephone cable, the mayor said.

Today, all land line 911 calls in the city are answered at the police desk, where an officer transfers the word to the firehouse if needed. All cellphone 911 calls already are answered at the Sheriff’s Office.

McCaffrey said a city police officer answering 911 will ask callers what type of emergency they have. “If they say anything health-related, they’ll be transferred to the Sheriff’s Office,” the mayor said.

Schrader, D-4th Ward, said the call will be switched at the touch of one button.

With no rescue calls to attend to, city firefighters will be able to perform more fire code inspections at commercial properties and multiple dwellings. Schrader said state auditors have called on the city to do more of those.
The city charges $100 per inspection. When Fire Department officers perform the inspections, their union contract calls for them to be paid a stipend.

“Not only does it enhance revenue, it enhances safety,” McCaffrey said.

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