

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
OF MONROE COUNTY, ILLINOIS MAY 5, 2016  
SPECIAL MEETING

The Special Meeting of the County Commissioners of Monroe County, Illinois was called to discuss the Monroe County Ambulance Service was called to order at 7:00 p.m. Chairman Terry Liefer, Commissioner Delbert Wittenauer, and Commissioner Robert Elmore were present.

The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Ralph Axe led the group in an opening prayer to commemorate National Day of Prayer.

Others present included the newly-appointed members of the Ambulance Service Review Committee – Dwight Boehm, Jim Maurer, Glen Mueller, Mark Yeager, Gene Henckler, Joe Gregson and Toni Whipple, along with County Clerk Dennis Knobloch. Others present included about 60 people including members of the Ambulance Service, the public and the press.

There being a quorum present, the meeting was called to order by Chairman Liefer.

Public comments were received.

Caroline Muench presented information regarding emergency situations that have occurred around Monroe County and how the members of the Monroe County Ambulance Service have answered the call to transport the victims safely to local hospitals. She also spoke of the negative aspects of joining forces with CHS – Community Health Systems – the parent group of Red Bud Hospital.

Steve Nikolaisen, former Administrator of the Monroe County Ambulance Service said he had been gathering information from the County Treasurer and County Clerk's office. He said you have to look at the numbers. He included information from the surrounding Counties, and he said only Randolph County had a lower Ambulance Tax Levy than Monroe County, so he didn't think the County Commissioners should be so concerned about the Ambulance Service's financial situation.

Tim May, of Columbia, said he has been a long-time member of the Fire Department, and he felt since the voters made the decision to establish and support this service in the late 1970's, it should be left up to the voters whether or not something different should be done with the Ambulance Service.

Kyle Hyduke, of Red Bud Regional Hospital, said he was very proud of the billboards along Illinois 3 that said there was no wait time in the emergency room at Red Bud Regional Hospital. He said it is a top-notch facility, and the people in Monroe County should be proud to partner with them.

Judi Horrell said that she would like to dispute the information on the billboard. She said in January, 2015, she was suffering from a pulmonary embolism and called Red Bud Regional Hospital to ask how long she would have to wait for care if she went there. Ms. Horrell said the person she talked to there said she would just have to come to the Hospital and see how long she would have to wait. Ms. Horrell said she drove to St. Anthony's instead, and the problem was remedied. She said she was curious who approached who – did Red Bud Regional approach the County Board asking if they could take over the Ambulance Service, or did Terry Liefer approach

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Red Bud Regional to see if they were interested in taking over the service. Ms. Horrell also said she felt this was a safety issue, because there will definitely be delays in service if the Ambulance has to drive from Red Bud on the two-lane highway with slow traffic and tractors.

Ralph Axe said he has tremendous respect and admiration for all of the members of the Monroe County Ambulance Service. He questioned why the Ambulance Service was being singled out regarding their budget – he said it was unfair to judge them. Mr. Axe said he felt that so much money is being thrown at other County Departments, and he felt it was unfair to pick on the Ambulance Service. He said the taxpayers are the Boss – we elected you guys, so the Commissioners need to listen to the public. Mr. Axe said he felt it was ridiculous to even be here considering a change in the Ambulance Service.

Ed Laporte, the local AFSCME Ambulance Service union representative, said everyone should be proud to see “Monroe County” on the side of the Ambulances. He said he didn’t feel it was appropriate for a private entity to generate profits from a public enterprise like the County Ambulance Service.

Dr. Mike Kirk, local physician, spoke up in defense of CHS. He said in October, 2015, he joined forces with CHS, because of government regulations he could no longer afford to operate his medical business on his own. He said you could talk about any large hospital system with the same comments presented by Caroline Muench – every large hospital system has lawsuits and regulatory problems. Dr. Kirk said he had to think long and hard before making the move to change the structure of his business. He said he started his office here in Waterloo and continued to grow and evolve with the needs of the community, eventually branching out to Columbia. He said he is now involved in building a large multi-story medical facility in Columbia that will also include urgent care. Dr. Kirk said it has been a twenty-year mission for him to build the outpatient care facility. He said this is basically a cost issue – does it make economic sense? Dr. Kirk said we are fortunate that we are a financially healthy County. We have been able to subsidize the Ambulance Service and keep it going while many other smaller Counties have not had that luxury. He said if the County decides to go with CHS, the taxpayers need to demand the service be operated as they feel best. Taxpayers should make the decision on where the Ambulances are housed and what their response time will be to all parts of the County. He said since tax dollars are involved, they should demand a high quality service. Dr. Kirk said the bottom line for him was that over the years, because of increasing government regulations, his overhead went from 48% to 76%, and that was the main reason he joined CHS, rather than remaining a private business. He said he talked to numerous hospital systems in St. Louis, but none had any interest in crossing the river to be affiliated with his medical facilities. Dr. Kirk said there is also the possibility that in the future, Monroe County could be a perfect place to build a hospital. Gene Henckler said he understood Dr. Kirk to say that the Ambulance Service was run well in the past, but that is no longer the case. Dr. Kirk said he was sorry if he was misunderstood, but he felt the Ambulance Service still provides quality care to their patients.

Vicki Koerber said she didn’t feel it was necessary to tie the current Ambulance Service to the possibility of having a hospital in the future.

Judi Horrell said she questioned whether or not insurance would cover Ambulance transports if the Ambulance came from Randolph County to pick up patients in Monroe County.

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Following nearly 45 minutes of public comment, Chairman Liefer said he wanted to move on to the next Agenda item of having the Committee select officers. Following some discussion, Jim Maurer said he would be willing to serve as Chairman of the Committee. Motion was made by Gene Henckler, with a second by Joe Gregson to appoint Jim Maurer as the Ambulance Service Review Committee Chairman. All voting Aye, none Nay and none Absent. Motion carried.

Jim Maurer took over the leadership of the meeting.

Ed Laporte asked what the role of this committee will be and whether it was even legal for the County Board to be appointing this committee. Chairman Liefer said the role of this Committee will be to review the Ambulance Service and make any necessary recommendations to the County Board.

Commissioner Wittenauer asked if these meetings will always be structured as Special County Board meetings. Chairman Liefer said these meetings will be just like any of the other County-appointed Committees, like the Planning Commission or Board of Appeals, where they have their own appointed officers and handle their own business proceedings

Motion was made by Dwight Boehm, with a second by Gene Henckler to appoint Mark Yeager to serve as the Committee Vice-Chairman. All voting Aye, none Nay and none Absent. Motion carried.

There was a request for a Committee member to serve as Secretary. No one volunteered for that position. Commissioner Wittenauer asked Dennis Knobloch if he would be willing to serve in that capacity, and he said “no”. Commissioner Wittenauer asked if he would be willing to transcribe from a tape if the meeting were recorded, and Mr. Knobloch said “no”. He said he would be willing to continue gathering the minutes from this meeting and would transcribe them for the Committee.

Jim Maurer said he wanted everyone to know that the Committee members have no vested interest in any direction that is taken with the Ambulance Service. He sees the role of the Committee – to review the existing Service and the proposed Service and make a recommendation to the County Board on the proper direction to go with the Ambulance Service. He then asked for additional comments from those in attendance.

Ralph Axe asked if the Committee is going to review the Ambulance Service budget. Jim Maurer said it was his intention for the Committee to give the budget a fair review. Chairman Liefer said he will see that the Committee is provided with any related information they feel they need.

Chairman Liefer said since there was a group of representatives from CHS at the meeting, he felt they should provide their presentation to the Committee. In attendance from CHS were Shane Watson, CEO; Zack Schmidt, CFO and Chuck Lattimer, Supervisor of the Ambulance Services affiliated with CHS.

Shane Watson said he wanted to address all of the negative comments that had been directed at CHS earlier. He said that a group of the hospitals that were previously under the CHS umbrella have now split off to form their own group – Quorum Health. He said this group now has nine

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member hospitals including Red Bud Regional. Mr. Watson said he has served as the CEO at Red Bud for nine years, and he lives in Monroe County. He said if they would take over the Ambulance Service, they would make sure the Service Facilities remain local and onsite. He said they would make an effort to integrate with local Healthcare partners. Mr. Watson said several of the areas where he felt they could improve the service is by utilizing their own billing systems as well as their nationwide educational resources for training purposes. He said he also felt there would be some opportunities to save money through their supply and drug purchasing network as well as some possible operational efficiencies.

Jim Maurer said he needed to interrupt to ask whether the County was looking at having Red Bud Hospital take over the Ambulance Service because the Service is currently losing money.

Shane Watson said he felt taking over the Service was a viable option for Red Bud Regional.

Jim Maurer asked – if the County decides to outsource the Ambulance Service, shouldn't this be opened up to any company that is interested?

Chairman Liefer said you can see from this discussion that there has been no prior predetermined discussion with any of these Committee members as to how they should approach this situation.

Jim Maurer questioned whether it would be cost effective to continue the Service as it is.

Vicki Koerber asked whether CHS has had prior access to the Monroe County Ambulance Service financial records.

Shane Watson said his company has a nondisclosure agreement on that issue.

Jim Maurer said it is probably premature for us to even be talking with CHS at this time.

Chairman Liefer said he had previously talked with CHS about a year ago, and they provided an initial proposal for taking over the Ambulance Service.

Glen Mueller said he previously had known of the contact with CHS about a year ago.

Chairman Liefer said about a year ago he had talked with CHS in addition to several other services and provided all of them with the Ambulance Service financial information.

Jim Maurer said he wanted to make sure that those in attendance didn't beat up on Red Bud Hospital – it is a good institution that does a good job and they employ a lot of local people.

Steve Nikolaisen wanted to know why the numbers weren't reviewed as he had presented them earlier in the meeting.

Chuck Lattimer spoke of how they handle those Ambulance Services that come under the umbrella of their company. He said he is a Paramedic himself, and none of the Services they take over are dictated from the top down. Mr. Lattimer said the patient is always taken where they

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will receive the best care – not necessarily to one of their member hospitals. He said no Service they have taken over has ever been downsized.

Ralph Axe said if there was a problem last year why was this Committee just formed right now. He said he felt Red Bud shouldn't even be here until it's decided that the County needs to look other directions.

Zach Schmidt, the CFO of the Hospital group, said his company is trying to expand their business, and they saw the opportunity in Monroe County to grow their business and cut taxpayer subsidies while also improving service to the community.

Jim Maurer said he really didn't feel the Committee was at the point to discuss a takeover by an outside company.

Chairman Liefer said the Ambulance Service did fine until about three years ago, and then they started falling behind financially. He said at that time the newest Ambulance was six years old, and the Service didn't have the money to buy a new unit. He said there were also problems with billing at that time.

Commissioner Wittenauer said the County started by outsourcing the billing to an outside company. He said there was also a problem last year when the State changed the way it was sending reimbursement dollars to the County, and the Treasurer mistakenly credited money to the Ambulance Service that should have gone to the Health Department. Commissioner Wittenauer said the County Board felt the Ambulance Service was doing fantastic until they were told of this error, and when the money was moved to the Health Department, the Ambulance Service budget didn't look so good. He said he felt the Committee needs to take a detailed look at the current service, and he felt this Committee should have been formed a long time ago. Commissioner Wittenauer said if the Committee makes the recommendation that the current Service cannot be fixed, then it should be left to the taxpayers to determine whether they are willing to pay more in taxes before the Service is outsourced to a different company. He said maybe the taxpayers of Monroe County would be willing to pay more in taxes to keep the service as is.

Chairman Liefer said last year the Ambulance Service finally caught up on billing, but now the Service needs to be looking at new equipment again.

Jim Maurer asked – to understand this, the Service is tight on budget, maybe a deficit of \$50,000 per year, but now the billing is being done correctly?

Mark Yeager asked – if the County owns this building, why is it charging rent to the Ambulance Service?

Commissioner Wittenauer said the Ambulance Service is not a required service to provide to the taxpayers so the County charges them rent, while the offices at the Courthouse are required, so they are not charged rent.

Chairman Liefer said the County was required to charge rent after the Annex building was completed to provide money to make the annual bond payments.

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Steve Nikolaisen said the building has been paid off for several years, so why is the County still charging rent?

Commissioner Wittenauer said the County has continued to collect rent so it can build up a fund to provide the necessary maintenance on the building – it won't be long and the building will need a new roof.

Joe Gregson said he was curious as to how taking over the Ambulance Service tied into building a hospital in Monroe County.

Shane Watson said Monroe County is a fast-growing County, and building a hospital here could be an option.

Joe Gregson asked if the building of a hospital would be dependent on transferring management of the Ambulance Service.

Shane Watson said the two were not necessarily tied together.

Chairman Liefer asked about any extra involvement in the community by the company.

Chuck Lattimer said they always get heavily involved in the community, and many times get involved in providing training at no charge to local firefighters and EMS personnel.

Chairman Liefer said what services are available in case of disaster.

Shane Watson said in the case of a disaster of any type, their company would provide the staff and resources necessary to assist the County.

Jim Maurer asked if the Red Bud Hospital group had anything else they would like to add.

Shane Watson said no, and thanked the Committee for their time.

The members of the Ambulance Service Review Committee introduced themselves, and spoke of their backgrounds along with their reasons for having an interest in serving on the Committee.

Mark Yeager said he felt there were some things that could be done to improve the service and was willing to look at anything that would help. He said as a member of the Waterloo Fire Department and the Chief for many years, he worked with the Ambulance Service personnel on many occasions, and respected the work they do for the Service and the County.

Jim Maurer asked what the next steps of the Committee should be.

Joe Gregson said he felt there was too much information to review to make any kind of decisions at this time.

Jim Maurer asked if it would be possible to get copies of the Ambulance Service budget for multiple years.

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Gene Henckler said to remember if you get into discussing any personnel issues, you will need to go into executive session.

Jim Maurer said he didn't anticipate that any of the committee discussions would carry over to discussion of personnel.

Chairman Liefer said the County Board would work to determine the deficits in recent years and share that information with the Committee.

Commissioner Wittenauer said the annual subsidy from the taxpayers is about \$500,000 with a portion of that going to Columbia.

Jim Maurer asked about the amount of the Department's annual budget.

Carla Heise said the annual budget is about \$1.3 million.

Chairman Liefer said the taxpayers provide a subsidy of about \$500,000 with about \$200,000 of that going to Columbia and \$300,000 staying with the County service. He said the balance of the budget income is provided by the fees charged by the service.

Commissioner Wittenauer said the income from calls has been reduced because of a decrease in reimbursements from Medicare.

Jim Maurer asked – if the Ambulance Service was profitable or even just flush, would this discussion about outsourcing go away?

Commissioner Wittenauer said yes.

Chairman Liefer said he wasn't sure, because the County Board is always looking at improving services and decreasing taxpayer costs. He said the Board is currently making plans for an energy audit, they have brought payroll services in house, they have gone to a single County Health Department, they are currently looking at adding a rehab unit to the Nursing Home and the County is now housing Federal inmates at the County Jail – all with the idea of increasing revenues to the County to keep the taxpayer burden as low as possible. He said the Board is always looking at ways to improve services and not increase taxes. Chairman Liefer said another of the problems faced by the County is PTELL or tax caps, which prohibit the amount of increase available to the taxing districts.

Jim Maurer said the Committee will definitely need to see the budgets for the Ambulance Service.

Chairman Liefer said he feels the service quality provided by the Ambulance Service is good.

Toni Whipple said she would like to see the budgets for the last five years.

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Jim Maurer asked if the financial problems are the result of the State not making payments to the County on a timely basis.

Commissioner Wittenauer said up to this point that is not the case.

Mark Yeager asked if by going to the outside billing service the revenue for the Service has increased.

Chairman Liefer said when the service was brought in, the County was a month to six weeks behind in billing, and now they have brought the billing to a current status.

Jason Nonn said you need to remember there has not been a full fiscal year of service from the current billing company.

Nick Hoeffken said this is the second billing company that the County has contracted with – the first one terminated their agreement with the County.

Mark Yeager said he felt there was a better understanding of what direction the Committee needed to go.

Glen Mueller said the Committee members will need complete information prior to the next meeting so they can begin to study the details of the Ambulance Service.

Jim Maurer said he would like for Carla and her staff to be represented at the next meeting, and he would like for States Attorney Kris Reitz to be in attendance to answer any legal questions that may arise during discussion.

Mark Yaeger addressed the Red Bud Hospital contingent and asked – if you folks are so interested in taking over the Service, and you have noted items that can be improved, can you just provide that information to the County...what can you do better?

Shane Watson said there are many opportunities. He said they have large purchasing contracts that provide lower costs for supplies and drugs, they could provide billing services, etc. He said they would leave the personnel as they are currently and they would receive the same wage structure.

Wes Hoeffken said the Ambulance personnel currently are under the IMRF retirement system, and if a private firm takes over the service, they will not have this State retirement program available.

Jim Maurer addressed the Red Bud Hospital group and said – if you are all Monroe County residents and taxpayers, why not share this information with the County Board so your taxes stay as low as possible.

Tim May said this company will make their profits on patient transfer calls.

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There was discussion regarding the next meeting of the group. It was decided to shoot for Thursday, June 2, and Toni Whipple said she would contact the Extension Office to see if the meeting room would be available.

Nick Hoeffken asked if the Committee was also going to check the budgets of the other County Departments.

Jim Maurer said he didn't feel it was within the scope of this Committee to go to that depth of study – they were only charged with reviewing the Ambulance Service.

Vicki Koerber said you also have to consider all of the community service like the County Fair and other events that the service participates in.

Jim Maurer thanked everyone for their attendance and input.

There being no further business to come before the Board, motion to adjourn was made by Mark Yeager, with a second by Gene Henckler. All voting Aye, none Nay and none Absent. Motion carried.