

Posted on Wed, Feb. 16, 2005

Supes renew ambulance group AMR

## By Peter Felsenfeld CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Ending a politically rancorous debate, Contra Costa supervisors Tuesday unanimously chose American Medical Response to provide county ambulance service for the next five years.

The nation's largest ambulance company beat out Arizona-based StarWest Ambulance for the estimated \$161 million contract to cover the entire county except the San Ramon Valley, Orinda and Moraga.

AMR has operated in Contra Costa for more than two decades, most of those years with a de facto no-bid contract. Struggling to differentiate between two evenly matched bids, supervisors in the end chose the provider with a proven local record.

\_\_"When you're dealing with a life and death situation ... there's a risk in change," said\_\_ Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond. "It may not be a high risk, but there's a risk."

Company and county officials are expected to work out a final contract in the next two months.

The competition prompted AMR to promise service improvements. The company's proposal includes adding a community outreach worker to train the public in first aid and prevention. It also plans to hire a medical data analyst to track calls and suggest where to best deploy resources.

As a last-minute sweetener, AMR agreed to drop a \$198 fee it sometimes charges for calls that don't involve transporting patients.

"I believe what we're offering is absolutely better than what the county has gotten before," said Leslie Mueller, AMR's director of operations in Contra Costa.

Before voting, Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier of Concord said he hoped retaining the incumbent would not deter companies from making an offer next time. "The fact that there was another bidder on this obviously improved the service we're going to get," he said.

Both companies made a final pitch Tuesday. StarWest's featured an 11th-hour promise to respond with two paramedics everywhere in the county. Contra Costa health officials require one everywhere except Richmond, where they require two.

Additionally, the company said it would share profits with local communities and give AMR's employees a 5 percent raise. StarWest's proposal said it would keep the current workers on the job.

"That means we'll accept less profit," CEO Pat Cantelme said. "But that's OK. We want to be here."

StarWest's concessions couldn't overcome AMR's service record. The company met its response-time goals on more than 90 percent of its calls this past year, according to county records.

Supervisor Gayle Uilkema of Lafayette said her office has received one complaint about AMR during the past eight years. Her district includes Rossmoor, a senior community.

"There is no substitute for a satisfied customer," she said. "And the people in my district are very satisfied."

The selection process featured unusually strong public politicking. AMR spent more than \$135,000 last year to help elect Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho of Discovery Bay. More recently, the company placed newspaper ads trumpeting its service.

StarWest last month blitzed residents with mailers and automated phone messages promoting its case. The campaign triggered fears among hundreds of county residents who incorrectly thought their ambulance service was in jeopardy.

Both sides pledged to stop campaigning during the past two weeks.

Cantelme said StarWest would not challenge the board's action. "We gave it our best shot," he said. "We respect the supervisors' decision, and that's it."

Peter Felsenfeld covers Contra Costa County. Reach him at 925-977-8506 or pfelsenfeld@cctimes.com.

© 2005 ContraCostaTimes.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. http://www.contracostatimes.com