

Dublin ambulance squad shuts down

The company's closure follows that of neighboring Perkasio.

By HILARY BENTMAN

THE INTELLIGENCER

Two months after Perkasio's ambulance squad shut down, Dublin's service has met with the same fate.

And unlike their neighbors, Dublin has no plans to get back in business.

Dublin Regional EMS officially pulled its ambulance off the road on May 11 after years of financial struggles finally forced the squad to call it quits.

"Because of financial hardships we can't go any further," said Sandi Cowperthwaite, president of the Dublin EMS board. "We ran out of money."

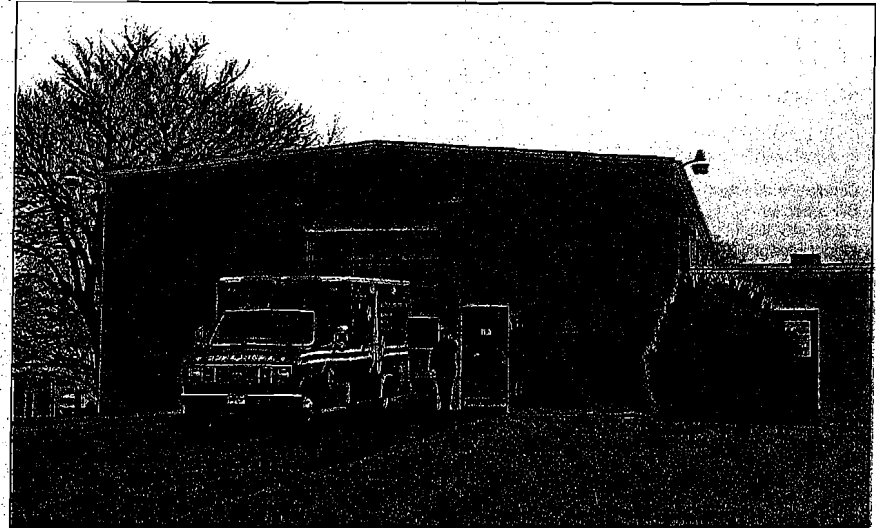
Although the squad tried to stay afloat, Cowperthwaite said the company expected it could come to this. Dublin's money from its insurance companies was coming in sporadically, it owes at least one neighboring ambulance squad money and it couldn't make salary for its seven paid employees.

"It's a sad day," said Cowperthwaite. "We tried hard."

Dublin EMS, as required, has notified the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the municipalities it serves — Dublin, Bedminster and parts of New Britain and Plumstead townships — as well as the neighboring squads who will be called in to cover their region.

The squad is required to give the state health department 90 days notice, "but we recognize 90 days isn't (always) possible and we're looking for an orderly close-

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ing," said department spokesman Richard McGarvey.

Dublin EMS has left its board intact to handle the administrative issues between now and Aug. 11, its official closing date.

Even with two Pennridge area ambulance companies not operational, officials say they are not concerned about residents receiving adequate service. The county has a system to provide backups for all squads so no area is without an ambulance provider. Backup service is provided by companies such as Point Pleasant-Plumsteadville EMS, Central Bucks Ambulance and Grand View Hospital.

Dublin's demise came just before a state study was to be released on the region's emergency medical services. The study, which will be released at a closed meeting today to Pennridge area government officials and emergency service representatives, is designed to assess the operations and needs of the area and offer recommendations for ways to provide the best possible and most sustainable coverage.

Some surmise it will recommend dissolving or merging squads, creating a management company to oversee the squads but allow them to retain their autonomy, and asking the municipalities to contribute a fixed amount of money each year to the squads, possibly through an ambulance tax.

Dublin's struggle is nothing new and can be traced back a decade or more, said East Rockhill Supervisor Dave Nyman. The ambulance service was once part of the Dublin Fire Co. But in 2001, the fire company decided to

disband its ambulance service, due to lack of money, volunteers and enough calls to keep the service going.

Dublin Regional EMS became an independent entity, responding to about 400 calls a year and offering basic life support services, said McGarvey. For BLS services, emergency medical technicians respond to calls. Most ambulance companies provide ALS, or advanced life support, in which medics handle calls 24-7.

In 2003, Dublin EMS pulled \$16,571 from its fund balance after its expenses outpaced revenues, according to that year's 990 form — a financial report the Internal Revenue Service requires of tax-exempt nonprofits. In 2003, Dublin EMS had \$109,977 in revenue but \$126,548 in expenses.

Last month, Dublin EMS was evicted from its headquarters on Route 313 after the building was sold and the new owner told them to leave. The squad had found a suitable home nearby at the Technology Enterprise Center at 123 N. Main Street in Dublin.

The problems, area officials say, are ambulance companies are not run like businesses and are having trouble maintaining a financial foothold.

"They are great at performing medical service but they're not managers or administrators," said Nyman, who was not surprised by Dublin's demise. "The impression they were giving out to people was they were perfectly viable. They didn't want to be grouped with Perkasio."

But Nyman said the company has debt, owing more than \$10,000 in reimbursement money to at least one other squad.

Point Pleasant-Plumsteadville EMS Chief Steve Fleischer is still not sure how

much Dublin owes his squad. "That number we're still working on but I believe it to be substantial," he said.

Fleischer's squad often backs up Dublin on calls and when both ambulances transport patients, Dublin is supposed to handle the billing to the insurance company and reimburse Point Pleasant. Unfortunately, said Fleischer, his squad was not getting paid.

Point Pleasant-Plumsteadville has tried to support their neighbors by providing staff, expertise, and vehicles.

Another problem, said Nyman, is how insurance companies pay out a claim. The insurance money goes directly to the insurer, or the patient, who is under no obligation to pass on the money, he said. A legislative proposal has been made to change this system, so the money goes straight to the squad, he said.

In March, Perkasio Community Ambulance was forced to shut down after years of financial problems, including an embezzlement, and mismanagement, caught up with them.

Since then, the squad has taken steps to get up and running again, including reorganizing with a new board of directors and a volunteer-only force, and taking on the name Pennridge Emergency Medical Service, to reflect the larger community the squad serves. The squad has also filed an application to reinstate its license.

The company owes the Internal Revenue Service more than \$100,000 in back taxes and penalties and is working with the IRS and Bucks' Congressman Patrick Murphy's office, said Betty Graver, squad spokeswoman.

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