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Cost Challenges

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S. John Collins / Baker City Herald Baker City Firefighter/EMT Jason Bybee checks the status of an oxygen bottle Tuesday. He said medics are required to inventory all medical supplies each morning before beginning their shift.

Baker City Manager Fred Warner Jr. said Tuesday that the city might need to stop sending ambulances to some areas outside the city if it isn't able to accept a three-year federal grant that would help the city hire three new firefighter/paramedics.

The City Council discussed the grant Tuesday night. Councilors have to decide by Oct. 31 whether to accept the grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The grant would give \$462,099; the city would have to pay \$264,876.

The councilors' decision on the grant might depend on whether the Baker County commissioners agree to pay \$90,000 to \$95,000 of the city's share over the three-year period.

Councilors and commissioners will meet tonight at 6 o'clock at the Courthouse, 1995 Third St., to discuss the city's request for financial support.

Warner said that if the city can't raise the money it needs to cover its share, and thus doesn't accept the FEMA grant, the city might have to reduce the area served by its ambulances.

The fire department, which handles both fire and ambulance calls, sends ambulances to most parts of the county, the major exceptions being the Richland and Halfway areas and near Unity.

Warner said calls from outside the city limits have accounted for about 22 percent of ambulance runs from 2013-16.

The department averaged 1,526 ambulance runs per year during that four-year period, and the annual total increased each year — from 1,343 in 2013 to 1,535, 1,598 and 1,629 the subsequent three years.

Warner said revenue from the out-of-city calls falls short of covering the city's costs because many are paid by Medicare or Medicaid, which pay only a portion of the amount the city bills.

“What we're doing right now is not sustainable,” Warner said. “Our costs are rising faster than our revenues.”

“The (FEMA) grant brought this to a head,” he said. “Without some kind of change in the way we do business in the next year or two, we will be facing the fact that we can't continue to (provide) EMS the way we have for the last twenty years.”

Rising call volumes over the years necessitate the need for more staffing at the fire department, while budget issues such as rising PERS costs are making it increasingly more difficult to have a stable EMS service.

“These are really big decisions that affect a lot of people’s lives,” Warner said.

Councilor Loran Joseph suggested the additional \$150,000 to \$200,000 the city will receive annually for street maintenance from a state transportation bill could allow the city to transfer property tax revenue from the street department to the fire department.

Warner said a police officer has resigned and that position won’t be filled for three months. During that period officials will decide whether the city needs to fill that position. If not, the city would have more money available for the fire department.

See more in the Oct. 11, 2017, issue of the Baker City Herald.