

# Commission fights for dispatch service

## Health: Foothills 911 requesting return of regional EMS dispatch

By Krista Conrad

Staff Reporter

With a new provincial government at the helm, the Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission (FRESC) is hoping its plea for the return of EMS dispatch to the region will be heard.

Suzanne Oel, chairperson of FRESC, said the October 2009 consolidation of EMS dispatch to a centralized system has posed problems and resulted in poor service for residents. Ambulances are often deployed inappropriately, she said, leaving rural areas exposed with only one or two ambulances to provide coverage for a large geographical area.

"There are delivery service issues, like the ability of call-takers to triage calls," said Oel. "And there are issues with locating emergencies if callers can't provide rural addresses."

Prior to the 2009 consolidation, FRESC operated dispatch services for ambulances in the Foothills and other areas.

Oel met with Health Minister Sarah Hoffman in November during the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC) convention to outline the issues, suggest solutions



BRENT CALVER/OWW

Suzanne Oel, chairperson of Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission (FRESC), holds letters from nine municipalities asking the provincial government to return EMS dispatch to Foothills 911.

and request the return of regional dispatch to Foothills 911.

"We have supplied them with information and background and we hope they are reviewing our request," said Oel.

"We're hoping for them to rethink this because of our recurring service prob-

lems."

The fight to return dispatch to FRESC has been ongoing since 2009. The Commission has lobbied the Alberta Health Services (AHS) and the provincial government to implement a more collaborative model of dispatch for six years.

According to the AHS

authority to three Alberta municipalities to use the solution – the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, the City of Red Deer and the City of Lethbridge.

Oel said FRESC hopes AHS will approve a customized regional solution for southern Alberta, where collaborated EMS dispatch would be provided between the City of Calgary, the City of Red Deer, the City of Lethbridge, the City of Medicine Hat and Foothills Regional 911.

"We want to be able to provide the best quality service we can," she said. "This model would give us five satellites and help ensure all Albertans receive the best possible outcome for their emergency in terms of their responders."

FRESC is ready to take back dispatch without issue, she said, with 90 per cent of staff still trained and years of expertise and experience to deliver service, as well as geographical knowledge of the area.

Bringing EMS dispatch back to Foothills 911 would require only two additional staff members, she said.

"We've got it all figured out," said Oel. "You can't sit at the table and make these

requests without knowing how you'll handle the response.

"We previously had everything working so well, and we know we can meet the financial and service goals of the Province."

To add fuel to its request, FRESC asked its partner municipalities to sign letters addressed to Hoffman requesting the return of EMS to Foothills 911 with a collaborative model.

Nine of the municipalities responded with letters before Christmas, and they were sent to Edmonton on Dec. 23.

"We just want the return of EMS dispatch to our region," said Oel. "It's critical in a rural community where time is such an issue."

While she said she understands the NDP government has a lot of issues to wade through, Oel hopes to receive a positive response to the request by the end of January.

"It would be a wonderful New Year gift to hear they think we can handle the transition and have it given right back," she said.

"I'm all about hope. If someone sees the full story and sees there are still issues and helps us fix it, that's what I'm hoping for."

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