

Nenshi challenges NDP to end 'ill-begotten' plan to transition ambulance dispatch to AHS

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Mayor Naheed Nenshi suspects “something very bad” is in the works as the NDP government hums and haws over a stalled plan to transition ambulance dispatch services from the city to Alberta’s health superboard.

Consolidating EMS dispatch services provincially was hatched under the former Tory government but was postponed more than a year ago after it ran into strong opposition from Nenshi who blasted the idea as costly and ineffective.

In December, Health Minister Sarah Hoffman said the issue was on her desk but would not rush any decision to ensure Calgary patients “get the right care in the right place at the right time.”

On Thursday, Nenshi told members of the city’s intergovernmental affairs committee he suspects “something very bad is happening” with the long-delayed changeover that would see Alberta Health Services assume dispatch services in the city.

“Fundamentally, I believe it’s time to end this ill-begotten experiment once and for all and I just hope the province agrees with me on that,” Nenshi said following the committee meeting.

He acknowledged his suspicions may be based on nothing more than paranoia, but said he would prefer an answer from Hoffman “yesterday ... if it’s the right decision.”

“If it’s the wrong decision, stretch it out as long as you want,” Nenshi added.

In a statement, Hoffman said she would meet with Nenshi in the near future to discuss his “legitimate questions and concerns” about the proposed change. But she maintained her final decision would be data driven and would require more time.

“Given we are talking about emergency medical services in our largest centre, and the confusion around the decision before I took office, this is time well spent,” Hoffman said in an email.

AHS has said switching over to a centralized, borderless dispatch system would improve response times by giving paramedics more information and ensuring that the first available ambulance will be sent to the call.

However, Nenshi counters the current system works fine and that transitioning dispatch services would be more expensive, delay response times and result in lower patient outcomes.

It would also mean the city would lose millions of dollars each year and dozens of jobs. AHS and Calgary have a \$14.8 million agreement that sees the city provide EMS dispatch through its integrated police, fire and ambulance centre. The city could also lose 46 jobs if the health superboard chooses to terminate the contract.

AHS has spent at least \$10 million, hired new staff, leased space and purchased new equipment in advance of the switch.

A spokesman for the health superboard was unable to confirm Thursday whether the leased facility remains unoccupied and whether the new staff were still assisting with emergency calls from AHS's north and central regions and co-ordinating non-emergency ambulance transfers in the south.

Meanwhile, the Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission continues to lobby the New Democrat government to return ambulance dispatch services to the region.

The government centralized that system there in 2009 — a decision the commission, which previously oversaw dispatch operations, maintains has led to delays and worse service.

“We had formerly really excellent service for which we're very proud of,” said Suzanne Oel, chairwoman of the commission, who met with Hoffman in November to discuss the issue. “The hope would be when they really see all the information and evaluate the information they will see that it's really a great move to give us the dispatch back.”

Hoffman said she has not made any decision on whether to reverse the change in the Foothills region, but would continue to work with AHS to “track where the system is working and where we need to look for improvements.”

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