

Aptos fire department facing a sudden paramedic shortage

By BOB SMITH

The Aptos paramedic service is facing a crisis of sorts, and the district's board of directors isn't sure how to deal with the situation.

The problem came to light Tuesday night when Board Chairman Richard Duchscher reported on a meeting he attended with Dominican Santa Cruz Hospital officials on the paramedic staffing problems the department has been having recently.

The department normally has six paramedic-firemen assigned to its Rio del Mar substation, working two men each on three 24-hour shifts.

But a month ago, one of the paramedics, Nick Kolopos, went on sick leave because of a hip injury.

That put the department down to five trained paramedics. At about the same time, a fireman flunked out of the paramedic training program at Stanford Medical Center, leaving the department with no hope of quickly increasing its pool of paramedic-trained firemen.

That left the department with the alternatives of reverting back to the earliest days of the pilot program when one paramedic and one Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) trained fireman were assigned to the paramedic service, or ordering the remaining five paramedics to work double shifts covering for Kolopos, at a monthly cost of \$1,632.

Fire Chief Nick Baumgartner's first response, said Duchscher Tuesday night, was to notify Dominican that on one of the three shifts, a paramedic and EMT fireman would be working.

That, said Duchscher, was permissible under the contract between the county,

the fire district and the hospital — a contract that expires June 30.

"They (the hospital) requested that we run two paramedics," Duchscher said.

The dispute wound up in the County Counsel's office, and ultimately in a conference between fire and hospital officials.

"The doctor in the Emergency Room (who has direct supervision of the paramedics when they are treating patients) said Dominican would honor the contract (for one paramedic and one EMT fireman) but added that a decision would be made by the doctors to transport a patient (instead of treating him in the field) more often," Duchscher said.

Dominican Associate Administrator Wayne Boss and Paramedic coordinator Maria Finegan were unavailable for comment Wednesday morning.

"I wasn't very happy," Duchscher said. "I felt that they were not working with us very well."

While the department could operate with one paramedic on a shift now, Duchscher said that option will be closed to the department when a new contract is signed this summer.

"The contract is up June 30 and we had better expect a contract that requires two paramedics," Duchscher warned. "I don't think they will accept one paramedic and one EMT."

"I was upset that they would not work with us," Duchscher told the other four board members. "There are a lot of reasons for two paramedics but it wasn't a very friendly feeling that day."

"I got up and left before I got mad," Duchscher said.

Acting fire chief Bob Thompson told

the board members Tuesday that the department can operate with five paramedics although morale is beginning to be affected by the long shifts forced upon them.

"If we lose another paramedic, we would have to shut down paramedic service on a shift (one day out of three)," he warned.

The options facing the board now are to wait until Kolopos can return to work or is forced out on a disability pension, hire a temporary fireman-paramedic, or continue the double shift requirements.

Thompson said he thinks the hospital might be more understanding in the future. "It will be two years before the ambulance companies can fully implement their program."

"The hospital is only working with one paramedic program," Thompson said, referring to the possibility of Dominican shutting it down.

"It could mean that they won't have a paramedic program either," Thompson said.

"I really felt that they were pretty heavy-handed," Duchscher said. "It was pretty overwhelming that we run with two paramedics."

In other business, the board delayed decision on its service fee charges until next month. Board members, however, figure that they will have to raise up to \$1 million in revenue by 1982-83.

Based on a survey that says there are 10,000 residential and commercial units in the Aptos district, and assigning 10 points to each living unit (single family home or apartment), the average homeowner would wind up paying \$100 a year in fire service charges to the district.