

Lexington EMS not keeping up

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Ambulances still taking too long to answer calls, chief tells County Council

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Despite two years of improvements, Lexington County's ambulance service isn't keeping pace with the county's booming growth, Emergency Medical Service coordinator Tom Gross told a County Council committee Thursday.

County ambulances are so slow responding to emergencies that even people living in the best protected area of the county — near Lexington Medical Center —

sometimes wait up to 15 minutes, Gross said.

The likelihood of cardiac arrest victims surviving decreases dramatically if they are not given advanced life support within eight minutes.

"No matter where you are in the county, there is a likelihood you're going to wait a while for an ambulance," Gross said.

Overall in the county, an ambulance takes longer than 15 minutes to arrive 30 percent of the time, Gross said.

Gross asked the council's Health and Human Services committee for \$500,000 for two new ambulances and staff to help handle calls during peak times. There is a sense of urgency because even if money is approved now, it would take until the fall to staff the two crews and get them up and running, Gross said.

The full council will have the final say later this month, but the committee recommended the money be approved. Several committee members said the needs of

EMS sounded critical.

"To me, that's real serious," said Councilman George "Smokey" Davis of Lexington.

Poor response times for ambulances have been an issue in Lexington County for the past few years. In 1997, the council added a 10th ambulance and crew to help during peak times. Last year, shifts of some stations were extended.

But the number of calls has increased dramatically since then, Gross said. So far this year, the

number of calls is 11 percent higher than last year.

"We're back to where we started in 1997," Gross said.

Gross said he was surprised this week when he learned response times were longer than 15 minutes for nearly 30 percent of calls answered in March and April.

The County Council will address Gross' budget requests later this month.

In the meantime, there have been private talks between some councilmen and hospital board members on whether the Lexington Medical Center should take

over the EMS system. That issue will be one discussion topic during the hospital board's annual retreat June 11-12 in Charleston.

Mike Biediger, the hospital's CEO, did not attend Thursday's meeting but said the hospital board has made no decisions yet. Funding from the county would likely be required should the hospital take over the ambulance system, he said.

Running an ambulance system would likely not increase the hospital's patient referrals because patients would still have the option of which hospitals they are taken to. Biediger said.