

Megan Anderson
News story

BELLINGHAM, Wash. — The two-year dispute between the Bellingham Fire District (Local 106) and Fire District 7 located in Ferndale (Local 3855) has caused concerns to weigh on the minds of Whatcom County residents after Fire District 7 voted unanimously on Saturday to leave the International Association of Fire Fighters union.

The dispute initially began because Fire District 7 members said that the work belongs to them because the Emergency Medical Services plan specifically states that the fifth unit would be staffed under their district. The EMS plan was voted on by Whatcom County residents in 2005, and called for four Medic One units and the gradual phasing in of a fifth unit.

Bellingham Fire Department employees believe that the work belongs to them, arguing that every unit has been staffed with Bellingham Fire Department paramedics since Whatcom Medic One began in 1974. The International Association of Fire Fighters ruled in September that the work belonged to Local 106, causing more tensions.

International Association of Fire Fighters representative Ricky Walsh says that while Fire District 7 pulling from the IAFF will affect resources such as materials and training classes, he believes in the end the fire and EMS sources will be stronger.

“Fire chiefs and locals [have been] talking about service like never before,” Walsh said. “The situation is unfortunate, but I think Whatcom County residents will actually gain in the end.”

Still, this is of little comfort to Whatcom County residents who consciously rely on Medic One emergency services.

Chrystle Gibbins, a resident of Ferndale, feels concerned about the vote to leave the IAFF because her mother Alice suffers from epilepsy. Gibbins has used emergency medical help in Ferndale on more than one occasion in the past few years after her mother experienced severe seizures.

“It’s a little unnerving,” Gibbins said. “My mother’s seizures are infrequent, and while I still have faith in the medic unit it’s not exactly comforting to know there’s a dispute and that no one knows for sure how things will work out.”

Bellingham resident Tina Mason relied on Medic One this summer after her six-year-old daughter suffered a severe asthma attack. At the time, Mason was unaware of the issues between unions, but now feels concern over the dispute and how it will affect service.

“I know everyone is saying that it’s nothing to worry about, but I do,” Mason said. “As a mother who’s been faced with a scare, you can’t help but wonder if the paramedics minds won’t be on something else when they get a call that may interfere with whatever fight they have going on between them.”

Despite concerns over the dispute, there are still residents who feel safe in the hands of any Whatcom County Medic One unit.

Ferndale resident Guy Occhinogrosso says he doesn’t feel at risk when it comes to Fire District 7 handling emergency care and is in support of the training the paramedics at Harborview are receiving. Occhinogrosso believes that any training that can validate a need in the community is important.

"They [Fire District 7] are very highly regarded in this community, and that is directly related to who is in charge and the staff," Occhinogrosso said. "I do think that the fire district does the best with the skills they have, and that's all we can ask of them."

The County Council has been asked to approve \$331,000 to help pay for paramedic training at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle for six District 7 firefighters to staff a fifth Whatcom Medic One ambulance unit. The County Council tabled the decision to donate the funds twice, first on Oct. 7 and then on Oct. 21, hoping that the unions could work out the dispute.