Acadian Ambulance operation in Tangipahoa to be decided

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AMITE — Whether Acadian Ambulance Service will continue to operate in Tangipahoa Parish will be decided next month, company Secretary-Treasurer Richard Zuehlke said Thursday.

Acadian, which serves 15 other parishes in the state, began providing service in Tangipahoa last August after the Police Jury passed an ordinance requiring any ambulance company in the parish to have three ambulances in operation at all times with a qualified emergency medical technician immediate on each vehicle.

The owner of Tangi Ambulance Service in Hammond, Joe Garafola, had announced before Acadian decided to work in the parish that he would no longer pick up accident, shooting and drug-overdose victims because many refused later to pay for transportation to a hospital.

Garafola said this week he turned down an offer from Acadian to buy his business. He said he generally doesn't make runs for shootings and accidents, but his revenues have increased since Stevens Ambulance Service went out of business in Tangipahoa Parish late last year.

Tangi Ambulance charges $78 for transportation to a hospital, while Acadian offers 12 months of service for $42 or charges $140 for emergency runs for non-subscribers.

Acadian said 3,000 subscriptions last year for $42 each. Zuehlke said parish officials have been invited to a meeting next Wednesday to discuss rates for the next 12 months.

"If we pull out of Tangipahoa, we'd also get away from considering other expansion east of Baton Rouge," he said. His company figures on 15 percent of its emergency clients not paying their bills, but said because unemployment in Tangipahoa is higher than in other parishes the percentage of non-paying customers is greater.

"We're displeased because we've been unable to sometimes get the ordinance enforced," Zuehlke said. "The other company operates with one medic and an ambulance. He has several ambulances parked at his office, but only operates one.

"Law enforcement agencies call us, but when John Q. Citizen calls the operator and asks for an ambulance, it gets chaotic," he said. "We'd like to get assurances from community leaders in Tangipahoa that they'll see that the ordinance is enforced."

"When (Garafola) is called and doesn't want to make the run, he calls us or calls the person to call us," Zuehlke said. "I think the community wants us to stay in the parish."