Regional Shutdown Doesn’t Change The Original Issue

The abrupt shutdown of Regional E.M.S. makes moot the issue of whether the company should be given a license to operate in Lafayette. But it shouldn’t halt the debate over the future of emergency medical service in the city.

Regional’s four-year quest to establish itself in Acadiana illustrated two important points:

First, competition can improve the quality of ambulance service in a community. Officials from cities and parishes surrounding Lafayette agreed that the presence of both Acadian Ambulance Service and Regional E.M.S. was beneficial to their communities. Even Acadian officials admitted that their company had made improvements as a result of Regional's dogged pursuit of business.

Second, Lafayette's current ordinance regulating ambulance licensure is woefully inadequate for the 1990s. The state ethics board made a hash of the advisory committee that must sign off on permits for ambulance service, bungling four of the members for conflicts of interest. That left the decision to the city’s director of administration, who—no matter who is occupying the position—is ill-prepared for that kind of task.

Clearly, the ordinance needs revision. At present all an ambulance service need do is prove that it has insurance and that its ambulances won't break down on the road. There are no requirements relating to cost, response time, quality of care, or other factors that would ensure high-quality emergency service.

With that in mind, we reiterate our position of last January:

Either we open the market to additional ambulance companies and let competition ensure a high level of performance as it does in other industries. Or we establish clearly defined price and quality standards and then demand that our ambulance service live up to them in return for receiving a monopoly franchise.

The present system of no competition and no regulation is viable no longer.

—The Times, Jan. 13, 1993

As we pointed out in January, many progressive communities are moving toward a "public utility" method of regulation. Under that system, a community or group of communities forms an emergency medical service district. The district drafts a very specific set of guidelines which ambulance providers must meet. Typically, the guidelines will address cost of service, response time, quality of equipment and the like.

Ambulance companies are invited to submit proposals detailing how they would accomplish these objectives. The commissioners of this district then select one provider to serve the community for a set period of time, and they closely monitor its performance.

Such an approach may well have merit for Lafayette. Our position is not based on the premise that Acadian Ambulance is doing a poor job. In fact, by all accounts the company is an excellent provider. Rather, the public utility approach would ensure that this community continues to receive a high level of service—both now and in the future. This is the only way to keep the pressure on a monopoly provider to do a good job.

Now is a perfect time for the Lafayette City Council to inspect the flaws in our current system of ambulance regulation. Regional’s request for a permit no longer clouds the issue; Acadian is clearly entrenched. It is unlikely that any company will challenge its position in the near future.

A footnote to the issue: There has been some clucking in the city about Regional’s decision to sell its assets to Acadian. But that’s the essence of the free enterprise system. Would Acadian be willing to restrict its rights to sell its operations to some larger entity? We doubt it.

And therein lies the need for a more stringent method of regulation for ambulance service in the city. Changing methods of federal reimbursement are affecting every health-care provider in this country. That contributed to Regional’s decision to sell its assets to Acadian. What will be the impact of the changing health-care system on Acadian’s operation? Who knows? That’s why we should put a system in place now that will ensure high quality emergency medical care for the people of Lafayette ... now and in the future.