Who 'Ya Gonna Call?

For the last four years, Regional Emergency Medical Services has been slowly chipping away at the base of its huge competition, Acadian Ambulance Service. Now the uptown New Iberia company is going for the big prize—Lafayette. Regional hopes to be taking emergency calls in Lafayette this fall with four ambulances operating out of one substation and three additional substations by the end of the year. And company president Henri Queerou is planning to move Regional’s headquarters to the Fish City—where he says he can better coordinate his Acadian network.

But the Lafayette backbone will not come without a major battle. The city of Lafayette has an ordinance governing ambulance operations which gives the city administration broad discretionary power to approve or deny a permit for a company wanting to set up shop here.

And Acadian, a powerful business and political force in the city, will contest Regional’s Lafayette gambit.

“We don’t think it’s justifiable,” says Lafayette attorney Bob Wright who is representing Acadian in the matter. “There is no need and necessity for another ambulance service in Lafayette.”

Regional must navigate several hurdles before it receives the permit to do business here. First, it must convince the six-member Emergency Service Advisory Board that its operation would contribute to public convenience and necessity. That board is made up of the administrators of the four Lafayette hospitals with emergency rooms, the president of the Lafayette Parish Medical Society, and the city’s director of administration.

The ultimate authority to grant the permit, however, seems to rest with the director of administration, currently Floyd Domingue. Though the ordinance is somewhat vague on the matter, Domingue holds that the Advisory Board is just that. He will make the final decision, and he recognizes that it is an important one.

“I’m dealing with a very, very serious thing. I’m also dealing with the health and safety of the citizens,” he says.

This is not Regional’s first run at the Lafayette market. The company tried to move into Lafayette in 1990 and 1991, but was rebuffed. Queerou says that former Mayor D’Ad之类的 administration was opposed to granting a permit, and he chose not to challenge its decision.

“We are not really going to go into an area where we are not welcome,” he says.

But that attitude changed with the inauguration of Kenny Bowen, Queerou says. “The Bowen administration advised us that as long as we are a quality service that they welcome any industry coming into Lafayette. And that includes us,” he says.

Domingue insists that the decision will be his alone and will not be influenced by politics or by Bowen. “He told me to handle it. And I know he’s had a lot of pressure from both sides,” he says.

The political temperature is likely to mount. Several principals in Acadian Ambulance were financial supporters of mayoral candidate Ron Gomez, though they did contribute to Bowen at the end of the campaign, as well. But Acadian attorney Bob Wright has connections to the Bowen administration, and the ambulance service is also close to the Daily Advertiser, which was a major Bowen backer in the mayoral race.

Regional’s president Queerou gave money to the Bowen campaign. Acadian has already won a victory of sorts. The Emergency Service Advisory Board was scheduled to take up Regional’s application at a Sept. 3 meeting, just one day before the end of Acadian’s annual membership campaign. The hearing on the matter would have generated publicity on Regional’s Lafayette challenge even as Acadian was trying to entice last-minute subscribers onto its membership rolls.

But Domingue decided last week to move the meeting to October, citing his own busy schedule.

“There was just no way, with me going through the budget process, that I could have spent enough time on it,” says Domingue.

Queerou says the rescheduling had nothing to do with the timing of Acadian’s membership drive.

“I would not have moved it [for that], I am not going to play favorites on either side,” he says.

Regional is currently operating 12 ambulances in Iberia, Vermilion and St. Landry parishes. The company did $5 million in business in 1991, a regional milestone most aspects of his competitor’s operation. In fact, it was an employee of the organization in the 1970s and opened up service in several parishes for Acadian.

“Acadian is thought of as a very good company. And they are a good company. They are a very good competitor,” he says.

Queerou’s major beef with Acadian revolves around their marketing tactics. Though he calls company officials “marketing geniuses,” it’s a left-handed compliment. He is quick to add, “I don’t believe in their marketing strategy.”

Queerou takes particular issue with Acadian’s policy of selling annual memberships in a high-end restaurant setting. “I look at memberships as a four-ouncer,” he says.

He thinks that ambulance services should operate just like any other health care providers. Prepay the service and then bill the individual or his insurance. “We run two businesses like the hospitals do. Like the drugstore,” he says.

Of course, Acadian does bill patients’ health care insurance, including its members, for ambulance services, a policy which has drawn fire from some critics. Queerou, for one, suggests that the policy leads to higher profitability for Acadian.

“I don’t have all the market. And I’m making a profit without a membership,” he says. “How much profit was made then when they had all the market plus a membership?”

Though he does not like them, Queerou has actually returned to offering his own variation on memberships.

“The public perception of the need for a membership has been proven wrong, and it has become a standard way of doing business,” he says. But, unlike Acadian, Regional offers its memberships for sale year-round, and they do not have to be renewed annually. They are good for life.

And Queerou says that money derived from membership sales accounted for only 1 percent of his 1991 revenues.

[Acadian vice-president Richard Zaschlag declined to comment on Queerou’s criticism and referred all questions on Regional’s Lafayette move to Wright.]

Queerou says the stiff competition for business between Regional and Acadian has not created service problems in the parishes where both are operating. He says the two companies often co-operate when both are called to the scene of an accident. “In the effort of saving a life, there are no egos,” he says.

Hopefully, that attitude will continue when the competition for the big prize—Lafayette—heats up.