



BERTIE COUNTY

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Frequently Asked Questions: Chairman Perry responds to latest EMS changes

Question: Wallace, several county residents have called and asked the question—why are the Commissioners making all of these changes to the EMS ambulance service? What was wrong with the way we have always done it Bertie County?

Chairman Perry: I am serving in my 12th year as a county commissioner, and several years ago, the Board of Commissioners was overrun with complaints about how long it took for an ambulance to respond to an emergency call in Bertie County.

It wasn't just in my area, but all over Bertie County and the Commissioners were hearing complaints on a regular basis.

Question: At the July board meeting in Colerain, didn't Commissioner Trent say that he had read a study about the EMS program that the County paid for back in 2010?

Chairman Perry: That's right, and it was a very thorough study by a firm out of Charlotte. They looked at our entire EMS program and reviewed the services provided by each of the four EMS agencies running ambulances in the county.

They looked at the call volume, communications system and response times for the entire county. Of course, with several ambulance providers serving the County, it was natural that they were a bit defensive about the study.

The study pointed out that County Government shall establish EMS systems, shall serve a defined geographic area, and the highest level of care offered by any EMS provider service area must be available to all the citizens 24 hours per day.

And that was not happening in Bertie County, and the report clearly stated that there is no EMS "system" in Bertie County.

The EMS service at that time varied depending on where you lived, what time of day it was and which ambulance provider answered the call. Some people in the County received Basic EMT service, while

others might receive the next highest level—Intermediate EMT service. The law states that everyone should receive equal service at the highest level that is offered anywhere in the County.

Under the General Statutes, the Board of Commissioners has the sole authority to provide for emergency services. And it is up to the Commissioners to decide if the ambulance response system should be contracted with private providers, under a county franchise approved by the Board or should the ambulance service be a department of county government—directly accountable to the Board. The Commissioners have the responsibility to determine what level of service is best for our citizens, who should provide the service and how will it be paid for, and at what cost to the taxpayers.

Question: Do you think the average citizen understands what is involved with our EMS program?

Chairman Perry: As elected officials, County Commissioners take an oath of office where we pledge to uphold the Constitution and the General Statutes of North Carolina. The steps that we are taking in Bertie County, are required by the North Carolina law to ensure that all county residents are treated in a fair and equal manner.

As I have said to the Commissioners in our public meetings, we owe it to the people of Bertie County to do whatever it takes to provide emergency Paramedic services without a tax increase.

The Board of Commissioners has studied this program from all angles, and we have invested in professional studies and consultants to make sure that we are on the right track. We want high quality care and we don't want to break the backs of the taxpayers.

Question: What about the people who believe that the bids from the local ambulance providers seem to be a lower cost?

Chairman Perry: Whether we accepted the bid proposal from Bertie Ambulance at \$1.5 million or White Oak at \$700,000 there was going to be a tax increase. The costs that these companies quoted are yearly expenses for Bertie County taxpayers to subsidize their private business. Is that fair to the taxpayers?

Question: Some people have said that you have two people doing the job of EMS Director. How would you respond to that claim?

Chairman Perry: First of all, we have an Emergency Services Director, Mr. Cooper. His duties are much broader than EMS ambulance service, which is just one of the areas that he covers for the County such as Emergency Management which is a full time job in many counties.

If you go back to the study from 2010, the number one recommendation was to hire a full time EMS director, as well as a full time training officer to coordinate the training for the staff.

The study also reported that Bertie County was out of compliance in several areas, and most important, we did not have a Triage and Destination Plan for the most severe situations requiring transport to a trauma center, and for Bertie County that is Greenville's VIDANT hospital.

This is vitally important for trauma victims, burn patients, heart attack and stroke treatment and pediatric patients.

Question: Is the Board of Commissioners really satisfied with the reports on our EMS Paramedic program that First Med put together?

Chairman Perry: Let's talk about response times, and I think you will see why the County Commissioners are so pleased with the new Director Matt Leicester and the staff that we hired from First Med.

The Board of Commissioners set a goal of providing the highest level of pre-hospital emergency care, the Paramedic EMS level, which offers more medical treatment, technology and drugs available to the patient before they are removed from the scene of an accident.

Part of that goal included assurance that Paramedic level of care was available anywhere in Bertie County. Remember that under our old system, depending on where you lived in the County, you might not get the same level of care as a resident that lived closer to town.

The Board also set a goal related to response time, to ensure that from the moment the EMS station is notified, to the arrival at the scene, would take no longer than 20 minutes which is very challenging for a county that is spread over 700 square miles.

One of the criteria that the Board of Commissioners measures is what we call "chute" time which is the period from the station's receipt of the call until the ambulance is in route to the scene. Under the old system, the chute time could range from four and a half minutes to over six minutes. And when a patient has stopped breathing, every minute is precious.

At our last Board meeting, the EMS report from Matt Leicester indicated that the chute time was for the 273 calls in the month of December was 79.69 seconds as compared to the "old system" of 4 to 6 minutes, just to get the truck rolling out the door.

The 2010 study of our EMS program indicated that the total average response time including the "chute" time—measuring the period including travel to the scene, indicated that the average response time was 15 minutes and 26 seconds.

For the month of December 2013, the average response time for all calls was 10.08 minutes.

We started this new system on October 1st and the first month, the average response time was 11.09 minutes, and for November the average response time was 10.93 minutes.

So, for three months running, we have seen the response times steadily improve.

Question: Mr. Chairman, what is it that you want our citizens to understand about all of these changes?

Chairman Perry: The bottom line is that minutes and seconds save lives when it's your loved one or neighbor who needs help. The Commissioners want all citizens of Bertie County to have the best possible medical care when they need to call for help.

We have improved the system, and we are committed to growing the system without burdening the taxpayers of Bertie County. As we expand into the non-emergency transport service, we will need to hire more people, and that will be more job opportunities for our residents who work in this profession.

Resources are very limited in Bertie County, and the existing ambulance providers will be impacted by this decision. Your Board of Commissioners has to look out for the best interests of all 20,000 residents. If we had accepted the bids from any of the local ambulance companies this summer, the County taxpayers would have received a permanent tax increase in order to subsidize these businesses.

We have to look at what is best for all the people of Bertie County, not just the interest of a few.