

Hawaii Kai won't lose ambulances

**Mayor says the city will foot the bill,
about \$200,000, to maintain the service until
the Legislature can act**

By Jim Witty
Star-Bulletin

Mayor Jeremy Harris has pledged to keep ambulances rolling through the night in Hawaii Kai, regardless of a state proposal to curtail the service from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Harris told the Hawaii Kai Neighborhood Board last night that the city will pay the money - about \$200,000 - to maintain full function of the emergency medical station until the Legislature can appropriate the funds next session.

"I will not allow ambulance service in Hawaii Kai or anywhere else on this island to be cut," Harris said, joking that he'd organize a barbecue chicken sale if necessary to raise the money. "Our first goal is to convince the governor not to cut it."

Sen. Donna Ikeda, who said the Legislature never intended for Hawaii Kai ambulance service to be cut, called the mayor's offer a good short-term solution.

"(But) the governor has the authority to restrict money and reallocate it within the department," she said.

The pledge reassured about 75 jittery Hawaii Kai residents who showed up at last night's meeting along with a full complement of area lawmakers to protest the proposed cutback.

Health Director Lawrence Miike said the state looked at several options including dropping the Big Island's aeromedical helicopter, the ground ambulance at Waikoloa, the Kauai ambulance at Poipu-Koloa and the Hawaii Kai service to make up for a \$650,000 reduction in the Emergency Medical Services budget. Even without the shortfall, the department would have been "hard-pressed" to maintain services because of cost increases, Miike said.

In weighing their options, health officials looked at the number of emergency calls logged at ambulance stations throughout the islands, response time and backup, said William Christoffel, deputy director of the Health Department.

"Hawaii Kai has Wailupe," he said, referring to the nearby emergency station. "It's the area with the best alternative coverage. We felt we didn't have too many options. The only one in our mind with adequate coverage was the Hawaii Kai area."

That didn't sit well with Ikeda, Councilman John Henry Felix, Rep. David Stegmaier, a Hawaii Kai Democrat, or House minority leader Gene Ward, who proclaimed that Hawaii Kai "is not a Third World country."

"I'm sitting here thinking: Are we really talking about what we're talking about?" said Ward, who claimed that the threat of longer response times and inadequate coverage by the Wailupe station make the proposal unacceptable. "Our government has a problem getting its priorities straight and this is one of the worst budget cuts I've ever heard of."

Norma Yamane agreed. Her 5-year-old daughter suffers from asthma and needs prompt medical attention in the event of an attack. "Minutes are vital," she said.

Miike said the state is exploring an offer made by a private ambulance service to cover the Hawaii Kai area on a six-month trial basis. But there are legal hurdles to be worked out first.

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