Crossett city council met in special session June 26 at 5:00 p.m. in the Crossett Economic Development Building.

Present: Mayor McCormick, City Attorney James Hamilton

 Council Members: Martin, Foster, Rowe, Knight, Rodgers and Marshall

Absent: Clerk/Treasurer Walthall

Mayor McCormick announced that the purpose of this meeting is to discuss county ambulance service.

Mayor McCormick introduced Ashley County Judge Jim Hudson to the council. Judge Hudson stated that effective October 1, 2017 the county will be left without ambulance coverage. At a recent Ashley County Quorum Court meeting they voted to seek a ¼% sales tax issue to help cover the cost of an ambulance service. The quorum court also elected to have the Crossett Ambulance Service expand to cover the entire county. If this proposal is approved by the city council and the sales tax issue passes, the money generated from the tax will be split between the Crossett Ambulance Service and Crossett Ambulance Substation which would be located in Hamburg. This rural service would cover all of the county outside of Egypt Township.

Councilman Foster asked if the city had enough equipment and personnel to cover the county. Fire Chief Bo Higginbotham stated that there will need to be equipment and employees added. He feels that 3 trucks and 14 additional employees will need to be hired. This will allow for two 24-hour trucks and 1 day truck for transfers.

Judge Hudson stated that ¼% sales tax is estimated to generate around $752,000 per year. Half of the proceeds will be earmarked for the city of Crossett to help pay for the current ambulance service with the remainder of the revenue placed in a fund to cover cost of the rural ambulance service. Fire Chief Higginbotham has estimated that it will cost around $850,000 annually to run the rural service. Collections from ambulance runs should generate the remainder of the operating expense.

Councilwoman Rodgers stated that she has talked to several city residents. Most are not willing to pay the additional tax for a service which is already available to them. She asked who would be responsible for paying the election cost. Judge Hudson said the Quorum Court will pay the expense.

Councilwoman Rodgers asked the council to consider a feasibility study. She has contacted Jim Youngquest and he is willing to speak with the concerned parties to research how this could affect the city and the county.

Councilwoman Marshall asked County Judge Hudson if there was a backup plan in case the tax is not enough to cover expense. She is concerned that if the tax and collections are not enough to cover the expense, it will fall back on the city.

Chief Higginbotham added that he agrees with helping the county with an ambulance service, but not at the expense of the city. If a private service runs the entire county, including the city of Crossett, it will cut the revenue the city receives from ambulance collections. However, it will not cut the expense of running the fire department. The number of employees will remain the same to cover the fire and rescue services.

Councilman Rowe mentioned that if a private ambulance service comes in, it will not cover rescue.

Details concerning initial capital expense would need to be worked out between the Ashley County Quorum Court and the Crossett City Council.

Councilwoman Martin and Councilman Knight asked that a detailed profit and loss statement from Fast Ambulance Service be presented. The council members would also like to see a projected cost/revenue sheet for the proposed service.

It was asked if the Ashley County Quorum Court had discussed any other revenue source to support the ambulance service such as property tax assessment. Judge Hudson stated that they have discussed adding a charge to rural garbage collections, but the sales tax seems to be the best scenario.

Mayor McCormick stated that the city has looked at this plan two years ago. The priority for this group is the city of Crossett. While the county needs an ambulance service, Crossett Ambulance Service cannot afford to lose any of its current territory. Loosing Egypt Township would be devastating to the city as well as the residents that reside in the city’s coverage area. Mayor McCormick added that he would like a mutual plan that will benefit both the city and the county.

Councilman Knight asked County Judge Hudson if the county would consider paying for part of the feasibility study. Judge Hudson stated that the county is obligated to pay for the election but not for feasibility study.

Johnny Bolin stated that he is in support of the Crossett Ambulance Service operating the county. He added that he lives within a short distance of the Crossett station, but has family in the rural area. He feels that the feasibility study could show more details on how the city would be effected. Bolin added that everyone will benefit with a good health care system in place.

Dr. Brad Walsh asked that a backup plan be discussed. He is not opposed to finding revenue source where only residents outside the Crossett Ambulance Service area are billed. This could be with an assessment on personal property taxes or a fee added to garbage bills.

Councilman Rowe inquired as to how the revenue from the sales tax would be handled. Judge Hudson explained that the Quorum Court had said that the money would be split. One half of the monthly proceeds will be forwarded to Crossett General Fund for expense of Crossett ambulance and one half would be deposited in a county fund for rural service operations. Judge Hudson explained that many details will need to be worked out between the city of Crossett and the Ashley County Quorom Court when the proposal is more concrete.

Motion by Councilman James Knight, seconded by Councilman CT Foster to initiate conversation concerning a feasibility study. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed. Mayor McCormick asked Councilwoman Rodgers to talk to Mr. Youngquest to set up a time convenient for everyone to discuss the matter.

With no other business, the meeting adjourned.

Jesse Walthall, Clerk/Treasurer Marshall S. McCormick/Mayor