

AI Summary: Columbia Cnty EMS – Part V: Years to come up with a plan – now it's an emergency

Columbia County's EMS ambulance service dominated the last meeting of the Columbia County 5 (County Commission), exposing divisions over immediate coverage gaps, response times, funding, placement strategy, and the County's long-term role after AmeriPro's contract expires in 2029. With proposed MSTU taxes shelved and no comprehensive plan in place, the discussion shifted from years of delay to an emergency two-week deadline for County Manager David Kraus to develop a strategy.

Operational Strain and Performance: Compliance reached roughly 86% urban and 71% rural after adding a truck. Jeff Avinger, Director of Operations was blunt: *"We're solving for the geography... we got to get that to 90."* Chief Business Officer Thomas McEntee disclosed the system hit "level zero" (no available ambulances) ten times in eight days—six on June 1 alone. County Attorney Joel Foreman observed AmeriPro added units *"because they know they're not making times."*

AmeriPro has improved staffing but remains stretched by the County's geography.

Placement Tug-of-War: Commissioner Parnell pushed for a northern station near Mershon Road, above I-10, to speed response for remote *"constituents at the North End of the County."* AmeriPro's Thomas Stinson, a county resident and AmeriPro's County Operating Supervisor, defended the central Quinton Street location, arguing a far-north unit would deplete coverage. He noted the Mershon-north area *"presented less than 1% of the calls for last year."*

Controversial "Free" Ambulances and LSHA Path: The board unanimously passed Parnell's motion directing staff to return in two weeks with a plan for the Lake Shore Hospital Authority (LSHA). Success depends on a county plan, a legal opinion, and Governor DeSantis' board approval.

Core Strategic Conflict: Fire Chief Jeff Crawford presented a *"100% budget"* that none of The 5 wanted and warned that simply shoring up AmeriPro's contract *"is a wrong idea."* Commissioner Rocky Ford advocated immediate action, while County Chairman Tim Murphy was looking at restraint. Ford declared his goal: *"in 2029, I think the County needs to be back in the ambulance business."*

The Larger 2029 Question Remains: as Parnell called it, a *"bridge... we'll cross when we get there."*