

Beginning March 5, residents in the township of Watersmeet, Mich., and the surrounding Lac Vieux Desert (LVD) tribal community will no longer be serviced by either Conover or Land O' Lakes ambulance service. The towns had an agreement in place that paid Conover \$9,000 a year, listing them as the main ambulance provider for Waters - meet. By virtue of a mutual aid agreement, Land O' Lakes was also listed on the contract. The contract had some major flaws in it, especially on the financial end, according to Conover town Supervisor Tom Timken. Timken was appointed as town supervisor in December of 2014, and then elected the following April. Once he came on board with the towns and dug into the ambulance agreement a little further, it was he who urged the board to cancel the auto-renewing policy with Watersmeet, saying it was costing Conover taxpayers money. "Conover is funding an ambulance that is spending the majority of their time in Watersmeet," Timken said. "That was the real eye opener to me." Conover did cancel the agreement in December, but it had a 90-day cancellation period that comes due March 5. By the numbers, Timken is right. In 2015 alone, the Conover ambulance was dispatched a total of 231 times. Of those calls, 146, or 63%, sent Conover to Watersmeet township or the LVD reservation. Sometimes the runs took the ambulance crew more than an hour in one direction, according to Timken. The 146 calls to Watersmeet in 2015 compare to 69 calls the ambulance was dispatched to in Conover, three each from Phelps and Land O' Lakes and 10 from Eagle River. This is a staggering difference according to Timken, who broke down costs and operating budgets, showing the \$9,000 was something that should have been revisited a long time ago. "It probably never came to light because no one up there brought it to our attention, and when something automatically renews it sometimes can get overlooked," Timken said. "And with a new tribal clinic set to open up in 2016, that number of calls was only going to increase." The way services and charges work for an ambulance run is sometimes hard to understand, said Timken. If a page for services is made, and the ambulance goes to a township for a call, but does not transport, it does not bill anyone for services. This results in costs for

time, gas and materials being drawn from the annual operating budget. That is what was being covered by the \$9,000 annually, but the overall operating budget for the ambulance crew in 2015 was \$95,375. So while Conover citizens paid \$42,085 for 69 ambulance calls, Watersmeet paid \$9,000 for 146 calls. "I've had some sleepless nights over this, but what can you do?" Timken said. "We had to cancel that contract because it was just upside down for our taxpayers." In the event a patient is transported, or medical services are performed, a bill is sent to the patient or their insurance company via Conover's agent, LifeQuest, who then reimburses the ambulance service once their invoice is cleared. In 2015, LifeQuest charged patients of the Conover ambulance service \$105,334.70, but only collected \$29,301.94 while writing off \$37,922.77 in adjustments. That leaves a \$38,109.99 outstanding balance compared to just a \$8,587.33 balance on Conover's township. "I just think if you're using our equipment 63% of the time, you should pay 63% of the operating costs," Timken said. "I can understand how maybe it was a shock to the town of Watersmeet when we approached them, but it's not fair that this town has to support services in Watersmeet. Something had to be done." Timken said that the reduction of calls he expects in 2016 is not a comforting feeling. "You still have your morals and our EMS team is very worried about who's going to be responding," Timken said. "Then there is the technical side of things. Our team might be hurt a little bit because if we look at it from one side, we're going to be responding to 63% fewer calls and not have as much to keep our skills sharp. It might mean more training, classes, etc." Timken said Watersmeet applied for a federal grant for its own ambulance, but it will not find out until August if it will receive the grant and for how much it would be. According to James Loeper, emergency management/911 coordinator for Gogebic County, Mich., any ambulance service request out of Watersmeet township will be directed to central dispatch and Medevac ambulance service from Iron River, Mich., will be dispatched to Watersmeet. The distance from Watersmeet to Iron River is 30 miles compared to 19 miles from Conover.