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Ambulance referendum challenged

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The La Crosse Common Council president said he will work today to resolve an issue that could keep a petition-driven referendum on a municipal-run ambulance off the April ballot as written.

The city clerk's office Tuesday certified the grassroots petition intended to force a binding referendum vote during the April 7 elections.

But City Attorney Stephen Matty said the referendum conflicts with Common Council action last month creating an emergency medical services fact-finding commission. The council can choose to keep the question off the ballot, run it as an advisory-only measure, alter the referendum or alter the commission legislation.

The council in November asked the fact-finding commission to determine whether the city should operate its own ambulance and agreed to take no further action until that panel reports back.

That commission met for the first time Tuesday, where it reviewed the negotiations among the city, La Crosse County and current EMS provider Tri-State Ambulance.

Matty said a binding referendum would "substantially repeal or amend" the city legislation that created the fact-finding panel, which in turn would violate state rules.

Council president Bill Harnden, the author of the fact-finding measure, said he'll meet today with the city attorney to work through the conflict.

"Hopefully we can craft out a way we can have the fact-finding commission but not interfere with the referendum," Harnden said. "It is absolutely my intent not to interfere. Hopefully we'll have this all worked out for reconsideration (Thursday) night."

Citizens for a Responsible Government-La Crosse County collected more than 3,500 signatures — well above the 2,930 needed — to place the item on the April ballot.

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