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Council approves ambulance ban, rejects referendum

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The La Crosse Common Council changed course Thursday, putting an end to a highly politicized debate over whether the city should operate an ambulance service.

The body reversed its own recommendation from earlier in the week on holding an advisory referendum in April to gauge public opinion.

Council member Dorothy Lenard warned backing out of the referendum only would cause further unrest.

The council's Committee of the Whole had voted Tuesday in favor of an advisory referendum coupled with a self-imposed ban on such a service.

While the council upheld 12-3 the two-year moratorium on offering ambulance and paramedic services, referendum advocates lost out by only one vote.

Thursday's vote still was a win for the more than 3,500 ambulance opponents that penned their signature to a petition forcing the council vote.

But local political watchdog Steve Gores, who helped circulate the petition, was frustrated by the council's moves.

"They twisted themselves up in a knot and they confused the public and confused themselves," he said. The council actually took three votes, approving the ban and turning down both an advisory and binding referendums.

Council member Doug Farmer, who crafted Tuesday's arrangement to approve the advisory ballot item and ban, argued against the referendum Thursday, saying the council was beating to death an abstraction rather than focusing on the city's real problems.

"This is not an issue. This is a politician's dream. It's a diversion," he said. "If you were going to make a list of the 10 biggest issues of the city of La Crosse, this wouldn't be there."

After the council voted down the binding referendum, council member Tom Sweeney said putting an advisory proposition on the ballot would be futile, because neither side has any incentive to fight.

Thursday's action may have felt all too familiar for council members still stinging from of a similar reversal in February, when the council approved on Tuesday and then rejected on Thursday a city administrator study.

"We told the electorate on Tuesday that we were going to do both. Mr. Farmer crafted it ...

promised he'd support it," Lenard said. "We get the reputation in the community they can't trust us."

To see how council members voted, go online to the City Hall blog, www.rivervalleyblogs.com/smarcus/

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