

# The Tribune-Democrat



## Bill would halt police billing practice

**BY KATHY MELLOTT**

The Tribune-Democrat

— A local legislator has introduced a bill in the state House to make it illegal for police departments to levy financial charges when they respond to vehicle accidents.

Authored by state Rep. Tom Yewcic, D-Jackson Township, the bill is in committee where an amendment is being added making it illegal for volunteer and paid fire companies to levy a similar charge for vehicle-accident responses.

“It’s really not a fair thing to do,” Yewcic said. “I call it a scheme, and it’s wrong.”

A number of local residents applaud Yewcic’s efforts. Among them is Luke Gutilla of Johnstown, who has received more than 20 notices from the Ohio-based Cost Recovery Corporation seeking nearly \$2,200.

The money is to cover the costs incurred by Richland Township police and fire for responding to a June 21, 2006, single-vehicle accident Gutilla had when his motorcycle slid on Route 56.

“This billing is very misleading to people,” Gutilla said. “They’re basically trying to con people into giving them money when they don’t have any right (to do so).”

Gutilla has refused to pay, despite receiving notice two weeks ago threatening legal action against him.

He said eight other people have contacted him seeking advice since reports published in November about his crash and ensuing circumstances.

Since 2004, a number of area municipalities have enacted ordinances that local leaders say empower them to bill the insurance company when the police department or fire company responds to vehicle accidents. It goes a step further and calls for secondary billing to be sent to the driver if the insurance company refuses to pay.

Billing is handled by Cost Recovery, one of a handful of companies that promote such ordinances for local townships and boroughs as a way to generate revenue to help pay for police and fire services. The collections agency keeps 10 percent of any money collected.

The New Castle, Ohio, company could not be reached for comment.

Richland Township, Johnstown, Southmont and a number of other municipalities have begun billing for emergency-response services.

But Yewcic said the state municipal code does not allow such ordinances.

“There is no statutory authority to allow them to do this,” he said. “There is no authority in the law to allow them to do this.”

The only way to stop the practice, Yewcic said, is passing a law that clearly states that the billing is not permissible.

Some insurance companies deny the bills, said Rosanne Placey of the Pennsylvania Insurance Department. Other pass the cost along to customers in their premiums.

“Insurers aren’t really under any obligation to pay those charges from cost recovery,” Placey said.

Kristy Richardson received a bill from police and fire in Richland Township following what she called a minor accident. She was surprised when bills then began arriving from Cost Recovery.

“Our insurance company is telling us not to pay,” she said, “but we worked hard for our excellent credit and

do not want this to ruin it.”

Yewcic spoke in favor of the legislation at a House hearing Tuesday in Harrisburg.

The local lawmaker said he has received numerous calls from constituents in Cambria and Somerset counties.

“Why pay taxes when you’re going to charge for services?” Yewcic said.

“No one’s attacking the fire companies, they do a great job. We all support them. But billing like this is not the thing to do.”

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