

\$65,000 contract to be awarded to design health plan

LOCKPORT - Niagara County legislators are expected to award a \$65,000 contract for designing a new employee health package to an Erie County company Tuesday, but without dumping a politically connected Niagara Falls firm.

Niagara Insurance Group of Williamsville, a Brown & Brown company, was recommended by County Manager Gregory D. Lewis for the contract because the firm scored the highest in interviews. He also called for removing Flexcare as the county's insurance broker. But the Legislature's Administration Committee shelved the recommendation in late August in apparent defense of Flexcare, a Niagara Falls company that has donated \$3,850 to the county Republican Committee in the past two years, according to Board of Elections data.

Flexcare, whose vice president of marketing is Town of Lockport GOP Chairman Donald J. Jablonski, was awarded a contract as the county's insurance broker June 1.

The county had not previously advertised for an insurance broker, but several Republican lawmakers from Lockport have been promoting Flexcare and sought to place the company as the health plan designer, too.

Legislator Danny W. Sklarski, D-Town of Niagara, who caucuses with the Republican-led majority, forced the issue into the open by introducing an individual resolution embodying Lewis' recommendations.

Last week, after a closed-door session, the Administration Committee voted to hire Brown & Brown, but it deleted the paragraph dismissing Flexcare.

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Sklarski said, "I do consider it a victory for the county manager, but if it pans out, it'll be a victory for the workers and the taxpayers." Lewis said Brown & Brown will act as a consultant to frame the new insurance plan he hopes to persuade county unions to accept.

Flexcare will continue as the county's insurance broker, a role Lewis said the county doesn't need at this time. It will not be paid unless it lines up a carrier to provide coverage under the new framework. If it does, its commission will be included in the premiums.

Said Legislator Glenn S. Aronow, R-Lockport: "Brown & Brown brings some attributes to the table that Mr. Lewis was obviously comfortable with. Flexcare's experience in Niagara County in dealing with the municipalities brings other attributes. I have been given an assurance that they will work together for the betterment of Niagara County."