Task force was convened as a result of the Pinellas Assembly conducted May 16-18, 2002. The task force was formulated to discuss fire and EMS issues within Pinellas County with a goal to make a recommendation for potential improvements and/or cost savings. The Pinellas Assembly Policy Statement charged the Fire/EMS task force to:

A study should be conducted of fire services countywide to assess levels of service, costs, the distribution of costs and services, and related factors. The task force should evaluate the potential for savings, improved services, and more equitable assignment of costs from consolidating districts, having cities serve parts of the unincorporated area, and/or combining the city and county units into a single countywide fire protection system with uniform salary and benefit scales. If full consolidation is recommended, the task force should propose an approach and time-line for phasing it in. The task force should study EMS and evaluate whether costs might be lowered and/or performance improved by combining EMS with partially or fully consolidated fire protection services.

All task force meetings are open to the public. BCC chair Seel's office is attempting to solicit additional members for the fire/EMS task force. City staff representative Jim Callahan's alternate will be Largo Fire Chief Williams, County staff representative Gay Lancaster's alternate will be Pinellas County Fire/EMS Administration Director Chuck Kearns. The goal of the staff representatives is provide whatever information and reference material necessary to assist the citizens in going through the evaluation process. This includes statistics, staff analysis, and provision of financial and/or other topic specialists.

A powerpoint presentation was given by Fire Chief Callahan as an overview of the current fire/EMS system in Pinellas County. Information provided included:

- Portfolio of services provided - fire, EMS, community education, fire code compliance, fire investigation, emergency management and other ancillary services.
- EMS system history.
- EMS system design - Public Utility Model - public/private partnership - high performance, all-ALS system.
- EMS system resources - fire department first-responders, private ambulance contractor, air ambulance, countywide medical control, medical education, emergency communications.
- EMS system funding - advalorem taxation (0.66 mills) and ambulance transport user fees.
- Fire Protection history and overview - automatic aid, contractual relationships, funding, specialty teams.
- Firefighting tasks/personnel resources and impact to response time coverage.
There was discussion on the feasibility/viability of equalizing the unincorporated fire district millage rate. Analysis by Pinellas County staff, based on FY 2003 data, indicated a uniform millage rate for unincorporated areas would be 2.688 mills. This analysis excluded the four independent special fire districts created by state legislature. It was noted that all fire jurisdictions utilize property valuation to establish a millage tax with the exception of Pinellas Suncoast Independent Fire District which utilizes a flat fee per residence and a sliding scale for non-residential properties.

The task force discussed issues and costs of regionalization or consolidation related to various fixed assets, political jurisdictions, wages/benefits/pension issues, labor representation, etc. In addition, consolidation would bring all fire related costs into the county's 10 mil cap. Questioned the comparability of costs between the fire service and police services. Indicated that law enforcement is being discussed by another task force, but also touched on the fact that the Sheriff is conducting a study of cost allocations between the countywide tax and the municipal services taxing unit (MSTU).

Generally it was agreed the Fire/EMS system in Pinellas County operates at a high level, but that improvements could be made in services and financing. Discussed the distribution and location of fire station facilities and types of response vehicles. Indicated 72 percent of total responses were medical related, while EMS first-responder revenues were originally based on the marginal cost to add medical upgrades (personnel and equipment) to existing firefighter resources.

Questioned how Pinellas County compares to other similar jurisdictions. Very difficult to find comparable jurisdictions because of the make-up of the system (public utility model) and establish the validity of the data (apples to oranges).

The task force requested additional information:

- Demographics by station or district
  - Call volume by station
  - Population served
  - Staffing
  - Equipment (condition and age)
  - Who utilizes Penny for Pinellas Local Option Sales Tax (LOST) for purchase of apparatus.
  - List of millage caps and current millages by fire district
  - Determine necessary steps if regionalization or consolidation were recommended, i.e., legislative action, countywide or regional referendum vote, charter amendment.
  - Benchmark data?

Next meetings: 6/2/03, 2 p.m., 9-1-1 Communications, 315 Court Street
6/16/03, 2 p.m., Largo Training Center, 201 Highland
Other information:

- Fire protection services - provided by municipalities and independent special fire districts. Independent fire districts are created through state legislation for this specified purpose (Lealman, East Lake, Palm Harbor, Pinellas Suncoast). Note: St. Petersburg/Clearwater Airport Crash Rescue provided through Pinellas County.

- Fire Protection Agreement - agreements executed between Pinellas County Fire Authority (BCC) and 10 municipalities to provide fire protection to unincorporated county areas. Specifies minimum staffing levels and response time standards. Funding is based upon the relationship of real property values within the unincorporated and incorporated areas of the district - i.e., if 17 percent of the total property valuation is in the unincorporated area, those areas will be assessed a fire district tax to generate 17 percent of the total fire budget. These percentages may change annually due to annexation, reassessment of property values or through new properties being added to the tax roles. Unincorporated fire district millages ranged from 1.299 to 3.608 mills in FY 2003. Records indicate FY 2003 unincorporated county fire funding to municipalities totaled approximately $14 million.

- Automatic Aid - the perpetual countywide automatic aid agreement was executed by all municipalities, fire districts and Pinellas County for the response of the closest or most appropriate unit to an emergency without regard to jurisdiction.

- EMS 1st Responder Agreement - agreements executed between Pinellas County EMS Authority (BCC) and 12 municipalities and 4 independent fire districts to provide paramedic-level first responder units. Fixed price contract with annual adjustment based on MCI. Specifies minimum staffing levels and response time standards. Records indicate FY 2003 EMS funding to fire department first responders totaled approximately $19.5 million.

- EMS Ambulance Agreement - agreement executed between Pinellas County EMS Authority (BCC) and American Medical Response (AMR) to provide emergency and non-emergency interfacility transport services. Specifies minimum staffing levels and response time standards. Records indicate 2001 collections for ambulance transport user fees totaled just under $25.8 million while the cost of the ambulance contract (including the provision of countywide medical supplies) totaled approximately $18.5 million. AMR operates under the county's trade name of "SUNSTAR."

- Public Utility Model EMS - public/private partnership utilizing fire department ALS-level first-responders and private transport contractor. High performance EMS system utilizing geobased first-response coverage with transport ambulances utilizing peak-load staffing and system status management, i.e., deploying differing quantities of ambulances strategically placed throughout the county based upon historical analysis of call data and transport demand. Provides first-response within 7:30 minutes and transport on scene within 10 minutes 90 percent of the time. Pinellas County provides for countywide medical direction and quality assurance, continuing medical education, and transport billing and collection services.
Millage information:

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