

Pinellas Assembly - Fire/EMS Task Force
Meeting Minutes - August 11, 2003, 3:00 p.m.
Largo Training Center

Present: Ed Hooper, Chairman; Joe Calio; Sally Foote; Sally Israel; Jerry Knight; Kathleen Litton; Tim Schuler
Staff: Chuck Kearns (Gay Lancaster absent), Caroll Williams (Chief Callahan absent)
Others: Mayors: John Doglione, Tish Elston (Deputy Mayor), Robert Jackson, Bill Mischler; Fire District Board Members: John G. Frank, Rebecca Harriman, Tom Hafner, Bob McEwen, Robert Shatanoff; City Council Members: Hoyt Hamilton, Neil Brickfield; City Managers: Michael Gustafson, Bruce Haddock, Bill Horne, John Lawrence, Wayne Logan, Ellen Posivach, Steven Stanton; Pinellas County Staff: Steve Spratt, Dwaine Booth, Craig Hare, Janice Metzger, Linda Shultz; American Medical Response: Bob Garner, Jim Lanier, Steve Murphy, Dan Stumpfhauser, Bob Siler; Fire Chiefs: Jim Angle, Kevin Bowman, Dan Graves, Rowland Herald, Bud Meyer, William Naylor, Jay Stout; PCCFF/FPF: Timothy Baker, Ed Broomes, Dave Daiker, Mike Moore; Others: David Brown (LE), Linda Hallas (PA), Rick Koda (SE), James D. Large (SP), Steven Smith (SP), Allan Sychowski (MB),

Mr. Hooper began the meeting by requesting that those in attendance sign the roster.

The Committee unanimously adopted the minutes of the last meeting.

Mr. Hooper asked that individuals in attendance introduce themselves.

The goals established for the Task Force were read. The Pinellas Assembly Policy Statement charged the Fire/EMS Task Force to:

Conduct a study 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.

Mr. Hooper stated that some of the issues that had to be addressed related to partial or complete consolidation of the fire service, a countywide goal of a 3 or better ISO rating, mutual purchasing agreements, the Belleair/Belleair Bluffs issue, budget concerns, and the appropriateness of County fire protection funding.

Mr. Hooper acknowledged the presence of Stephen M. Spratt, County Administrator, and said that he welcomed Mr. Spratt's input, especially considering Mr. Spratt's knowledge of the Miami-Dade fire system, a semi-consolidated fire protection service.

Mr. Calio asked if city administrators and fire chiefs favored a model that would allow the various fire service entities to perform EMS emergency transports rather than AMR, the current ambulance service provider. The goal would be to provide more dollars to the fire departments to fund the hiring of additional fire fighters. John Daglione, Mayor of the City of Dunedin, mentioned that some fire services seem to favor moving in that direction, but if such a program were to be adopted, it would have to be equitable. Chuck Kearns, Director of Pinellas County EMS and Fire Administration, stated that annually, AMR handles approximately 106,000 transports and the fire departments transport about 120 to 150. Mr. Calio asked the group if there was interest in working toward construction of a model to encompass the

assumption of emergency transport duties from AMR. Mr. Hooper reiterated that some cities would support such a move and others would not. He feels that a clear consensus must be obtained in order to consider such action. Bill Naylor, South Pasadena Fire Chief and President of the Fire Chiefs Association, said that fire chiefs have a unanimous interest in such a proposition. Chuck Kearns asked if the fire chiefs had made a motion and taken a vote to support fire department transport. They had not. Largo Fire Chief, E. Carroll Williams, affirmed that there would be an interest if it can be established that a better system could be attained by such a move. He further stated that an assessment of benefits vs. cost must be conducted. John Daglione stated that if the system can be improved and the costs justified, there would be no downside to looking at the possibilities of such a proposal, but it must not increase costs.

Mr. Hooper mentioned that the issue is complicated because of different funding structures for EMS and fire components. EMS is funded at .66 mills, while fire funding varies between fire departments. Chuck Kearns pointed out some differences, stating that independent funding is currently as high as 5 mills, while Terre Verde is at 1.5 mills. Mr. Hooper asked why such differences existed, and that he believes the County has an interest in universal fire fees where everyone pays the same rate. Mr. Kearns told the group that he often receives calls from citizens questioning why they pay different amounts. Mr. Hooper mentioned that properties exempt from taxation (valued at approximately 7 billion dollars within Pinellas County) utilize services but do not contribute to offset the costs of service. Inequity within the tax base, and the fire service funding associated with it, was presented several times during the course of the meeting as a major concern of those in attendance.

Mr. Hooper mentioned that discussion of a consolidated fire service usually prompts questions about wages; will they be at the top of the scale or the bottom? Mr. Knight mentioned that several key components of a consolidated system are already in place such as centralized dispatch, coordinated responses, cooperative endeavors among the fire departments, etc.

Mr. Spratt, after being asked several questions about the structure of the fire service within Miami-Dade, stressed that Pinellas County had not taken a position on a consolidated system. He further stated that his experience with Miami-Dade should not suggest that he supports consolidation. He said that fiscal pricing and equity issues must be addressed.

Mr. Hooper asked several questions about what the County funded in connection with special teams (Hazmat, Technical Rescue). Chuck Kearns stated that partial funding by the County of these teams is ongoing and that the County provides vehicles, funds for training, technical equipment, etc.

The discussion again turned to consolidation of fire services. Mr. Knight said that it was his impression that there is major opposition to consolidation. One city spokesperson asked what savings would be realized through consolidation and stated that the city he represents would have serious issues with it. Another mentioned that they were happy with their fire service and wanted to keep it in place as is, but suggested that funding in a more equitable manner could be looked at.

Representatives of South Pasadena stated that they field questions about inequities of the tax structure all of the time and that after Gulfport annexed unincorporated areas, South Pasadena got the calls to handle but not the revenue. Chief Naylor stated that South Pasadena would like to annex, but can't afford the infrastructure costs (street lights, roads, sidewalks, hydrants) to do so. Cooperation between fire departments was also mentioned in that the departments often work together to realize economies, even when there is no formal agreement between them to do so. When the South Pasadena representatives stated that funding of their ALS First Responder unit was too low, Chuck Kearns advised that they ranked within the highest five of the eighteen fire service first responders in terms of per unit funding.

When discussion again centered on fire departments handling all emergency transports, a question was presented relating to how the transport was billed. Chuck Kearns stated that EMS & Fire Administration handles all of the billing, and that user fees fund the ambulance system. He was asked about the collection rate and total billed last year. Janice Metzger, EMS Finance Manager, responded that a recent month's collection rate was 70%, and that approximately 47 million dollars was billed last year.

Mr. Horne, Clearwater City Manager, stated that in order for the fire departments to consider this approach and respond, data must be evaluated. He further added that if the task force feels the approach will benefit the county, it must be considered. Mr. Kearns responded that there is a need to know the feelings of the other entities involved. He mentioned that the last time the ambulance service contract went to bid, three fire departments expressed interest, but only one presented a bid and it was in a partnership with a private company. A spokesman from Dunedin said that all 24 governments may want to look at it, but "don't want to fill in the squares" themselves. Mr. Spratt asked what problems would be solved if this conversion were to take place. He added that the numbers would have to be thoroughly analyzed and that equipment and capacity represent a big number. He cautioned that care and thoroughness are warranted in the evaluation of this data. Mr. Logan (Safety Harbor) agreed with Mr. Spratt, stating that the model and funding are key elements to consider.

Task force member, Sally Foote, asked attendees to identify needs across the county that might be fulfilled by cooperative efforts of the fire departments. She cited examples such as coordinated purchasing, purchase of various types of insurance, sharing of training facilities, equipment uniformity programs and asked if such cooperation existed, should it be formalized. Several attendees commented that some types of insurance may fit into this type of cooperative program (workers' comp, liability, etc.), but doubted whether medical insurance could, due to varying benefit levels. It was felt that smaller fire departments are not afforded the best prices for medical coverage. It was stated that insurance carriers often refuse to insure fire services because of their high-risk status. Higher workers' compensation claims experience within certain fire departments could also impact the effectiveness of group purchasing.

City of Largo representatives did not support pooling of resources citing that they have invested in infrastructure and have made major investments for the benefit of their communities. It was also felt that cooperative efforts are already in place. Chief Naylor commented that fire departments have worked on standardization of equipment and training. He also mentioned that although South Pasadena could not fund special teams, working through St. Petersburg and the County, he knows assistance is available to South Pasadena should the need arise. Chief Naylor stated that funding was broken, not the system.

Mr. Knight offered that a former consolidated purchasing program was ineffective because a uniform policy was not properly established. He indicated that fire departments undermined the effectiveness of the program by individually approaching vendors to secure prices lower than those established within the program. Using this scenario, he speculated that elected officials could have ensured the success of the program by voicing their support of certain policies.

Mr. Knight requested discussion of ISO ratings. He indicated that a number of years ago, fire chiefs had an initiative to request an ISO survey within Pinellas County in order to establish a 3 or better rating. The advantage of a minimum rating of 3 or better would be reduced insurance costs to commercial property owners, and in turn stimulation of economic development and investment. Savings to residential owners would be not occur. Mr. Knight asked if attendees felt these advantages were sufficient to rally support for a countywide ISO survey.

Dwaine Booth, Assistant Director of EMS & Fire Administration, offered some insight into a 1992 study that was conducted by ISO for the County. ISO was asked to conduct a study to determine what the rating would be if all fire departments were pooled together. The result was a rating of 4. Even though the rating was close to a 3, some cities pulled support, thinking the survey was associated with a consolidation issue. In 1992, the cost of the survey was \$17,000. Mr. Booth did not know what the cost of a current survey would be. Mr. Hooper asked if anyone would object to a survey being conducted. Largo Fire Chief Williams stated that his department actually lost points after making some improvements and said that the ISO rating criteria has changed. Largo representatives stated they were opposed to pooling because they did not want to bear the burden of the cost of improvements. Mr. Booth mentioned that certain rating categories are weighted more heavily than others, i.e., communications and record keeping processes. Chief Naylor added that one factor that kept his department at a 4 rating was manning levels. Mr. Booth said that during the 1992 study, it was difficult to determine what the cost of improvements would be, compared to insurance cost savings that a better rating would generate.

Ellen Posivach, Tarpon Springs City Manager, advised that she hears regularly from citizens who are opposed to any property tax increases and who favor fee-based services or reduction in services. She cited stabilization of costs, especially competitive salary issues, as being critical. She wants to see standard salary ranges between municipalities.

Mr. Hooper asked attendees to share an item from their "wish list". Mr. Spratt offered that he would like to see improved integration of services allowing economies to be achieved and the development of a fair tax structure to support fire and EMS services. Other "wish list" suggestions included:

- The acknowledgement of accomplishments of the fire chiefs by elected officials,
- Maximization of cooperative efforts in connection with training, purchasing, insurance cost containment, standardization,
- Increase in EMS funding for ALS first responder units in Oldsmar,
- Examination of bureaucratic downsizing,
- Cooperation and continued support from other cities in connection with manpower, ISO, NFPA standards,
- Establishing what the desired level of service should be, ascertaining the required funding associated with that level, and developing additional sources of funding,
- American Medical Response wished to be considered part of the EMS system, rather than a contract service,
- Safety of fire fighters and creative use of prevention techniques (sprinklers, construction, etc.). Emphasis on investment for fire prevention.

The meeting adjourned at 5:20 p.m.