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Fla. county EMS transport changes up in the air

The delegation's recommendation came Wednesday after a fact-finding session and public hearing

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St. Petersburg Times

PINELLAS PARK — If state lawmakers from Pinellas County have their way, a proposal to change how emergency medical services are funded will be on hold until an accountant has a chance to analyze the numbers.

Members of the Pinellas County Legislative Delegation also want the accountant to analyze the current system and a proposal by two firefighters to have firefighter-paramedics take patients to hospitals. Under the current system, the county contracts with Sunstar, a private, for-profit company to transport patients.

They want the study completed by July 1.

Delegation members also want St. Petersburg to hold off on a threatened lawsuit over the funding changes until the audits are finished and they can meet again to discuss the results.

The delegation's recommendation came Wednesday after a fact-finding session and public hearing. It came days before Tuesday's meeting when Pinellas commissioners are scheduled to consider a proposal by County Administrator Bob LaSala to create 22 EMS "subdistricts" across the county. Commissioners would then be able to set different EMS property tax rates in each.

LaSala did not return phone messages asking for comment. But at least one commissioner said he thought the subdistrict item should not have been put on the agenda now.

"This is the opposite of standing down," Ken Welch said. "It is the most inflammatory thing we could do at this point. I told him I'm disappointed it's on the agenda. It just flies in the face of what the delegation asked us to do."

Welch added, "I'm adamantly opposed to this nuclear option. It's almost like we're begging to go to court."

Welch said he was also concerned that LaSala suggested having both his proposal and the one by firefighters Scott Sanford and Jim Millican "operationalized" by a consultant before turning them over to the accountant.

The delegation and the public walked out of Wednesday's meeting thinking the plans, as presented, would go to the accountant, he said.

"This could be a credibility issue," Welch said, because the county would not be doing what the delegation wants and the public expects.

EMS has been an increasingly emotional issue over the past couple of years as property values have dropped and expenses have increased. LaSala has proposed cutting about \$11 million from the property taxes that go to the county's 18 fire departments that provide EMS service. The bulk of those cuts - about \$7 million - would come from St. Petersburg.

St. Petersburg officials say that big a cut - about 58 percent of the \$12 million it received from the county this year - would be devastating. The city can't run EMS properly on \$5 million a year, they say. The city has threatened to sue if LaSala goes forward with his plan.

Last week, county commissioners seemed to favor other strategies. One of those would be to try a pilot project in St. Petersburg using fire transport at night rather than the ambulance service. It's a move that could save \$2 million or more, St. Petersburg officials say.

But LaSala has seemed reluctant to embrace fire transport.

Said Welch: "It's almost like we're afraid the pilots are going to work."

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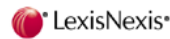
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But the county might not have a choice. The idea of fire transport is catching on with the public. All the residents who spoke during the delegation's hearing Wednesday urged the legislators to pass a law allowing Pinellas firefighters to transport. And several delegation members said that, if pushed to do something then, they would come down in favor of fire transport.

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