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"They would be willing to put some kind of amendment in the contract that says they'll look at this on an annual basis, and should those numbers increase to a point that it should be fully funded," Maciuba said. "I've not seen that in writing."

Fire administration staff had a hard time deciding what they would recommend to the commissioners as a response to the county, he said.

"I still think we should fight harder for full funding on the squad, if not that, at least that amendment," Maciuba said.

He said he suspected that some of the larger fire departments who were losing out on more funding would have bigger problems with the funding model than Palm Harbor does.

"They're still basing these decreases, much like they did on our squad, on monies they've never paid," he said.

Even the agencies that will have "no impact" will still be impacted because their funding would be frozen for four years, while costs like gasoline, insurance and union-negotiated wages will continue to go up. In Palm Harbor, the district would lose an estimated \$1.1 million over three years because of the frozen funding versus rising costs disparity, Maciuba said. His recommendation was to "sit back and let this play out."

The commissioners agreed.

"I think there may be some litigation or threats of litigation that come out from some of these entities. There may be some concessions that the county gives them, and we may as well see what the concessions are before we jump on the first package we get," Commissioner James Nelson said.

The county expected Palm Harbor to sign on to the plan, Maciuba said.

"Granted, we are happy with the increase, but we still have paid \$2.1 million or more just since 2009 to fund (squad 65), where all those years they have said it should be funding, and now it's just a partial funding."

Commissioner Norman Atherton said that the county's meeting on the issue was "very contentious." He argued for waiting to see how the issue played out.

"I just don't think we need to jump in and sign the contract. I would like Craig to go for the full 24 hours on the squad," he said.

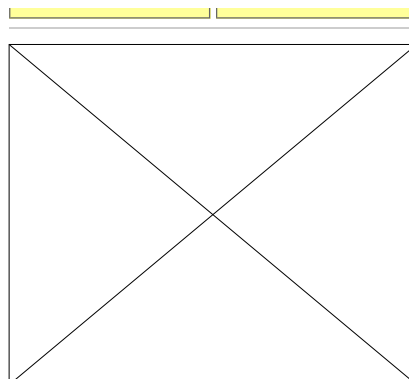
He added that the district has paid Palm Harbor taxpayers' money to fund the squad, which should have been "paid by the county, by their contract, not our wishful thinking."

"We played nice, now they're not playing nice," he said.

Under the proposed plan, 17 units across the county would receive only the 14-hour funding, essentially paying them to be operational only between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m., during the time there are the least amount of calls.

"The county's hope is that the fire departments and cities eat that cost and keep those units in service," Maciuba said. "Whether or not that happens, I don't know, but worst case scenario, we take 17 units off road after 10 o'clock at night. That is a huge service impact."

By contract, the district is held to a response time of 7 minutes 30 seconds. The proposed funding model would keep that average 90 percent of the time. But Palm Harbor's response time is currently around 4 minutes 30 seconds.



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"That is what is considered the excess of the system," Maciuba conceded.

The commissioners floated state legislation that had been drafted more than a year ago, which called for the fire districts to be overseen by a "user-run" organization, taking the county out of the equation and creating an entity similar to the Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization. The proposal had been written by former Chief James Angle, but was not pursued, though state Rep. Kathleen Peters had been willing to sponsor it or similar legislation in the Florida House, Maciuba said.

"The fire chiefs association at the time did not pursue it because there were all these other studies going on," he said. "(They were) kind of waiting to see how everything came out in the wash. And now we see how it came out."

The idea came up again two weeks ago during the meeting of the Council of Special Fire Districts of Pinellas. The idea was still in the "conception" stage, Maciuba said, but would continue to be suggested to other fire chiefs.

Atherton said the commissioners should wait at least until the county met with the fire chiefs to discuss more details, for which no specific dates have been set.

"I think some fireworks are really going to hit the fan," Atherton said.

There was a consensus between all five of the commissioners.

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