

## Largo approves EMS funding agreement

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LARGO – The Largo Commission gave its approval Aug. 19 to a hard-fought agreement with Pinellas County that provides three years of funding for the city’s emergency medical services services.

“It’s been a long road. I’m glad that we were able to work this out,” Commissioner Robert Murray said, before addressing Fire Chief Shelby Willis.

“Are you happy with this?” he asked.

Willis gave a relieved smile.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “It’s 180 degrees from where we started.”

Largo’s funding agreement will mimic the model the county negotiated for the St. Petersburg Fire Rescue department. The city will have an option for a two-year extension of the agreement after the initial three years.

Largo agreed to a 5 percent reduction in EMS funding from the county in the first year, the majority of which “naturally occurred” due to decreased personnel, health care and pension costs, Willis said. For the upcoming fiscal year, the city will have to cut its budget by only about \$16,000.

In the second year, the city will see an 8 percent increase in funding, followed by a 6 percent increase “if we need it” for the third year of the agreement, Willis said. Additionally, the county has set aside a 1 percent reserve EMS fund for Largo.

Before the city meeting Aug. 19, Pinellas County Interim Chief of Staff Bruce Moeller asked county commissioners to approve the agreements with the municipalities, as well as permission for the fire districts and cities to submit for EMS allowable costs.

“So now, as long as we stay within our budget ... we can submit for a portion of the station maintenance – pest control, lawn maintenance, electricity,” Willis said. “We’ve never been able to do that. We’re very excited.”

Commissioner Curtis Holmes asked what changed that allowed more EMS funding as compared to when the county was claiming they would “go broke if they ponied up to the bar.”

“What happened to them that they all of sudden found this pot of money that’s avoiding the apocalypse?” he asked.

Willis said the “budgets came in flat,” and Mayor Pat Gerard pointed out that the new county administrator, Mark Woodard, had adopted “a bit more cooperative attitude” than his predecessor.

City Attorney Alan Zimmet, who – despite the county’s initial protest that he had a conflict of interest, was able to help fine-tune the agreement – said it was the Largo commissioners’ action that helped. The city passed a resolution – following state statute chapter 164 – that began the conflict resolution process with the county.

“The adoption of 164 resolution seemed to turn the tide and changed the attitudes,” Zimmet said. “I think there was some information that was conveyed ... to the county commission that previously they weren’t aware of.”

### Other action

During the Aug. 19 meeting, commissioners praised City Manager Mac Craig for his integrity and another “stellar

year of calm, steady leadership,” as Gerard put it. Craig scored a 4.8 out of 5 on his annual evaluation. Commissioners approved a 3 percent pay raise for the city manager, equal to the proposed raise of other city employees not represented by a union.

Commissioners also approved the hiring of ISI Water Company, which will review the city’s utility accounts for discrepancies and be paid only if they find a billing mistake or an unauthorized wastewater connection for which the city is not being paid.

Finance Director Jim Adams said the city has never hired an outside company for a close review of its utility billing services. ISI Water Company did the same service for Pinellas County and found \$223,000 in billing discrepancies. The company is paid 46 percent of the newly collected funds for three years after finding them.

“I happened to like this thing. Even at 46 percent, this is found money,” Holmes commented.

The city also agreed to pay consultant Kimley-Horn and Associates \$44,500 to analyze the eligibility of an expanded Clearwater-Largo Road redevelopment district, funded with tax increment funding. The commission has expressed interest in using dedicated funding to stimulate economic growth in that area.

Commissioners also gave final approval, with a 6-1 vote, of two-year extension of the deadline by which point businesses must convert their poles signs to monument signs. The sign ordinance also was changed to allow any annexed business properties coming into the city 10 years to convert any nonconforming signs.

The commission also gave their initial approval to sell a miscellaneous, 0.014-acre property, originally deeded to the city by the county. The owner of the adjacent property has been maintaining the small piece of land and asked to buy it from the city for \$2,000.

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