

## Largo hosts talks on county EMS funding

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LARGO – Pinellas County has offered new terms for a potential agreement with the several Pinellas cities and fire districts that dispute its method for reducing costs for emergency medical services.

The new terms were introduced during a conflict resolution meeting with the city of Largo May 27, the first step required by law before the city can sue the county. The meeting, the city's first attempt to tackle the issue since County Administrator Bob LaSala was fired in April, comes with about 60 days left before governmental agencies must realistically finalize the agreement, and then their EMS budgets, in time for the new fiscal year budget process.

"I think 60 days is a very short amount of time to iron out some very significant issues," Largo Fire Chief Shelby Willis said after the meeting. "I don't think we've started all on the same page."

Largo, and a number of other fire districts who also attended the meeting at Largo Public Library, disputed three changes to the proposed EMS agreement, which would cause the cities to "receive less than the reasonable and customary cost of providing EMS services," according to the letter sent to the county.

Under a funding model called CARES 2, designed to reduce the county's overall EMS budget, the county had called for some of Largo's rescue units to be funded for 14 hours of the day, during peak times, instead of a full 24-hour day. The city also disputed a requirement to convert existing fire vehicles into EMS vehicles to replace the reduction of rescue units.

County staff have decided to back down from two of those proposals, said Pinellas County Public Safety Services Director Bruce Moeller, adding that "it was never the county's intent to push or force or require" operational changes within fire departments. The decreased funding, which was planned for Clearwater, Lealman, Pinellas Park and St. Petersburg as well as Largo, is no longer being suggested, he said.

The third and most prevalent issue still to be addressed is a proposal that would freeze the funding the county provides for the first three years of the 10-year contract with the fire districts. The funding would be frozen at what has been promised in the current fiscal year, fiscal year 2013.

With the reductions off the table, the current proposal puts the city of Largo in a better place than it was before the meeting, Willis said.

"Yet, we're still lower than we would have been for fiscal year 14, a couple of hundred-thousand dollars difference, plus the three-year cap. That was not our goal," she said.



Photo by JULIANA A. TORRES

Pinellas County Public Safety Services Executive Director Bruce Moeller, center, offers potential new terms in a contentious agreement with representatives of several cities and fire districts at Largo Public Library May 27. The meeting was the first step of a conflict resolution process initiated by the city of Largo in April.

Moeller and his staff will draft a proposal that adds in three caveats to the funding freeze. First, the cities will have a chance to recoup some of the actual cost increases for EMS, up to a yet-to-be-determined percentage of their respective EMS budgets. The cost increases would be calculated with the budget year audit and reimbursed after the fact from a reserve fund the county creates for that purpose.

Second, each fire district will have a chance to renegotiate the contract should EMS costs go beyond what is anticipated during the first three years.

Safety Harbor City Manager Matt Spoor argued that the three-year funding freeze reduced funding in subsequent years as well as the years it intended and suggested a third caveat. Under the county's initial proposal, percentage increases to funding in year four of the contract would be based on the funding given in 2013, regardless of the changes in costs during the three-year freeze.

"It's a cap for the length of the agreements," Spoor said.

Moeller argued that changes in EMS costs and property tax revenue could work in the cities' favor during the freeze. But Spoor, backed by agreement in the room, still wanted a mechanism that would adjust the base depending on changing factors during the first three years.

"We need to account for that base amount," Spoor said. "Without it, we're at the whim at the CPI to try to make that (cost increase) up in the future."

Moeller agreed to add a clause that would address that in a new draft agreement. He asked for the representatives present May 27 – which did not include anyone from the biggest fire district in dispute, St. Petersburg – to return to a meeting to discuss more specific terms, as drafted by county staff. He said he hoped the cities and districts could come to agreeable terms before presenting them to their elected officials, in order to speed up the process of signing a final agreement.

Before the meeting concluded, Pinellas Park Fire Chief Doug Lewis thanked Moeller for making the meeting more than a "one-sided conversation." But he added that the cities had not agreed to even the idea of the terms set, just that they would continue to discuss them.

The cities want to hold the county, as the EMS authority, to a final judgment in a 1999 lawsuit with St. Petersburg that the funding it provides be "reasonable and customary."

Moeller disputed that as the terms for an agreement. He wanted, instead, to come to a "business arrangement between governmental agencies," he said.

"The only way we're going to, with any affinity, determine what is truly 'reasonable' from a legal perspective is to end up someplace other than this room. That's not our desire. Our desire is to reach a reasonable agreement, a business arrangement, as we move forward," he explained.

Many representatives from the cities and fire districts asked some form of the question, why now? With pension costs dropping and EMS budgets coming in less than anticipated, the "do-nothing" model for EMS funding doesn't bring the budget to a breaking point in the next 10 years, said Largo Assistant City Manager Mike Staffopolous.

"Why change what has been reasonable and customary for something that doesn't seem to be a fiscal issue, at least in the next 10 years?" he asked.

He questioned, as did others, why the county wanted to impose "something as severe as a three-year freeze" in the new agreement.

"For us, that three-year freeze equates to about \$4.5 million over a 10-year window. That's considerable money for our agency, and I'm sure it's considerable for other agencies," Staffopolous said.

Moeller said to wait to solve the county's high budget costs of EMS would just kick the can down the road. He remained optimistic that the county could come to an agreement with the cities and fire districts within the time left in the budget process.

"This issue is primed for resolution," he said.

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