

Largo votes to fight county on EMS funding

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LARGO – The Largo Commission took the first step April 1 toward suing the county to obtain more EMS funding, rejecting its system-wide proposal, referred to as CARES 2.

Commissioners – minus Mayor Pat Gerard, who was absent – directed staff to draft a resolution “to initiate the conflict resolution process in accordance with chapter 164,” the state law that dictates mediation between governmental entities prior to litigation. The resolution makes Largo the first to make an official move in response to the county’s proposed Advance Life Support Contract.

Before making the motion, Commissioner Harriet Crozier suggested that the city could wait until the next commission meeting to see what the other large recipients of county EMS funding might do.

“Do we want to give staff two weeks and wait to hear? Because obviously, there’s not going to be any negotiations (with the county). Or do you want to just jump into the pot?” she asked her fellow commissioners.

Commissioner Jamie Robinson said that representatives from at least three of the municipalities were at the meeting.

“So, I think what they’re doing is waiting for us,” he said, drawing laughter and applause from the audience, made up of mostly firefighters and supporters. “If they’re going to wait for us, let’s get on it and go.”

The commissioners had invited Bruce Moeller, the county’s executive director of public safety services, to present the county’s proposal and answer questions about it. Largo Fire Chief Shelby Willis explained the department’s response. The funding the county is offering in a five-year contract, which could be renewed for five more years, would result in a loss of \$175,000 per year for the next three years, she said. Given the funding would be frozen for those years as well, the loss of inflation revenue would bring the total loss to an estimated \$2 million.

“Over the remaining years of the contract, by the time we reach the end of the 10 years, we will have realized a \$9 million shortfall in the city of Largo,” Willis said.

The county has proposed that two paramedic positions assigned to rescue units at Largo’s fire stations 41 and 42 stay in service for only 14 hours of a 24-hour day. The proposal is designed to save money during the system’s least busy time period between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., Moeller explained.

“Calls do not occur at the same level throughout the day,” he said. “At two in the afternoon, they are three times greater than at two in the morning.”



Photo by JULIANA A. TORRES

Largo Fire Chief Shelby Willis, center in white, chats with a crowd of supporters in the lobby of City Hall after a presentation on the impact of the county’s proposed cuts to EMS funding April 1.

Willis, however, argued that while two of Largo's rescue units were being taken out of service, rescue units that experience far fewer calls remain funded for the full 24 hours.

"The units that were selected for peak staffing – they come out of service at 10 p.m., or are not in the system whatsoever – seem to us to be arbitrary in nature," she said.

To illustrate her point, Willis compared the call volume of a rescue unit at station 20, based in South Pasadena, and the one at station 23, based in St. Pete Beach. Using the CARES 2 model numbers, rescue 20 and rescue 23 take 508 and 400 calls, respectively, between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. By comparison, rescue 41 and 42 take 1,260 and 1,119 calls.

The point was not to say that units in South Pasadena and St. Pete Beach didn't deserve the funding, Willis said.

"I'm merely pointing out that we run more calls, our workload is much higher, yet we're being taken out of service, and it seems arbitrary," she explained.

County staff used the CARES 2 model to determine which units it could take out of service, while still maintaining a response time of 7 minutes and 30 seconds or less 90 percent of the time, as required by law. But the numbers used in the model predicted Largo responded to about 4,500 less calls than actually handled in 2013, Willis said.

Further, the model does not take calls for fire service, which is the sole responsibility of the cities to fund, into account in its models. Calls for fires represent about 11 percent of the overall volume, however require a significant amount of firefighters over an extended time, Willis said.

"We've talked a lot about how EMS and fire funding can't be comingled. But the very nature of this plan takes our rescues out of service and puts our paramedics on the fire apparatus. They are co-mingling the service," she said.

Models that show how reduced personnel during night hours might actually play out leave the city with far fewer units should a fire and two medical calls happen within the same time period.

Willis and her staff have discussed their concerns in person with county staff. Officially, the city sent a letter to the county March 5, asking for the rescue units at stations 41 and 42 be fully funded at three paramedics each for 24 hours. Additionally, Largo asked for the county to fund one paramedic each for squads 38 and 39, positions that have been eligible for county funds based on a 2011 resolution, but never funded. Finally, Largo also asked that the call volume handled by engine 40, which is responding to increased calls at the Safe Harbor Shelter facility in the last several months, be monitored for potential extra funding if needed.

The county's response, sent in a letter March 20, refuted several of the city's claims and denied the city any additional funding.

"We all understand the county wants to cut. That's a given. But you're going at it the wrong way. You're not going to cut my service at night," Crozier said. "We are spoiled in Pinellas, and we need to keep it going, and we need to figure out the right way to keep it going."

Commissioner Curtis Holmes took it a step further, arguing that a government's primary objective was the health and safety of its residents. Saving a comparatively small percentage of the large county budget on EMS did not make sense, he said.

"I can't get my hands around why this is being done in the first place," he said. "I question the wisdom of the county officials."

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