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Plan would save \$6.3M on Pinellas EMS costs

By Chris O'Donnell | Tribune Staff
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CLEARWATER - Pinellas County commissioners are looking favorably at proposed changes to the county's emergency medical services that could mean fewer firefighters on duty overnight when 911 call volumes are lower.

The change is the recommendation from a \$300,000 study conducted by Fitch & Associates looking into how to reduce the county's escalating EMS costs. It proposes that paramedics who serve as first responders on medical 911 calls switch from 24-hour to 14-hour shifts, which would save about \$6.3 million a year, roughly 5 percent of the EMS budget of \$120 million for 2014.

Commissioners, who formally reviewed the report at a meeting Friday, plan to hear from the public and make a final decision whether to move ahead with the plan on Aug. 1. But there was clear support for the measure from several commissioners.

"We have data, which confirms what we knew two years ago," said Commissioner Susan Latvala. "That's why there is silence from the other side. I'm looking



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forward to Aug. 1 and us doing our job and getting the costs under control."

Commissioners are hopeful that the report could be a turning point in a long-running dispute with city and fire district leaders about the rising cost of the county's EMS system.

The county provides EMS services through an inter-local agreement with cities and Pinellas' 18 fire districts, paying about \$45 million a year to fire departments to double as medical first responders. Every fire vehicle dispatched on a call has at least one firefighter cross-trained as a paramedic. The money also pays for medical equipment and supplies.

Every 911 medical call also is attended by a Sunstar ambulance.

Commissioners and County Administrator Bob LaSala have warned that the county cannot afford to keep raising property taxes to pay for the service, regarded as one of the best in the nation.

But fire departments and city leaders have fought proposals they said would reduce the level of service.

LaSala earlier this month recommended raising the EMS property tax rate by 8 percent for 2014. Commissioners said they would use EMS reserve funds until they can reduce costs. County economic forecasts show that without reducing costs or raising taxes, Pinellas' EMS reserve would run out by 2019.

The Fitch report was commissioned after State Sen. Jack Latvala in 2011 set up a committee to mediate in the spat about costs.

The report concluded that a major overhaul of the system was not needed but questioned why firefighters worked 24-hour days when call volumes overnight plummeted.

"We will be forced to raise the millage rate if we don't do something," said Bruce Moeller, the county's public safety director. "These efficiencies have been identified; our duty to taxpayers is to go get them."

Cities and fire districts would have to agree to changes in working shifts with firefighter unions. The



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changes likely would not be adopted until 2015 at the earliest, Moeller said.

St. Petersburg was one of more than half a dozen cities that opposed a county proposal to reduce costs by having only ambulances attend low-priority 911 medical calls, and threatened a lawsuit if the county proceeded. The county delayed the proposal, which was rejected by the Fitch report.

St. Petersburg City Administrator Tish Elston said the county's decision to maintain EMS funding for 2014 will give Mayor Bill Foster time to look into how to reduce costs.

"He and Bob LaSala have said we will spend that next year seeing if there are efficiencies that are workable," Elston said. "He's optimistic we'll come up with agreeable terms."

But some fire chiefs still worry the cuts could leave fire districts shorthanded in a sudden major emergency.

"Is it worth it to the citizens to save \$6.3 million but reduce the capacity of the system?" said Lealman Fire District Chief Richard Graham. "It's OK as long as it's not your emergency."

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