

County open to deal on EMS plan

The Clearwater council holds off on seeking mediation.

BY ANNE LINDBERG-4/22/14

Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER - Pinellas County Commission Chairwoman Karen Seel offered an olive branch to the Clearwater City Council on Monday, saying that the county is willing to compromise over a proposal to cut funding for Pinellas' emergency medical services system.

The council accepted it, voting unanimously to hold off taking the county to mediation over the issue - at least for now.

'I want to give this process a chance without going to conflict resolution,' Clearwater council member Hoyt Hamilton said. 'If collaboration gets us nowhere down the road, you do what you have to do.' Council members made the decision Monday during a special meeting to discuss a county proposal to cut about \$2.3 million over the next three years to the five fire departments that answer about 70 percent of the EMS calls in the county - Clearwater, St. Petersburg, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman. The proposal would also freeze funds for the next three years and would cap the increases in the subsequent seven years to all 18 departments that provide first response EMS service in Pinellas.

Much of the savings, estimated at about \$60 million over the 10-year life of the plan, would come from a radical change in the way the county pays for firefighterparamedics. Currently, the county pays for all EMS firefighter-paramedics for 24 hours per day of work. Under the proposal, the county would pay some for 24-hour shifts and others for 14-hour shifts, essentially taking firefighter-paramedics off the streets.

The cities and fire districts have protested, but former County Administrator Bob LaSala said the County Commission would not allow him to negotiate. County commissioners fired LaSala last week after giving him mixed job reviews.

The county's inflexibility over the EMS issue prompted the Largo City Commission to vote last week to take the county to conflict resolution, a step that precedes a lawsuit. The Lealman Fire Commission has voted to join with Largo.

Seel said she plans to talk with Largo, Lealman, Pinellas Park and other cities and fire districts in an effort to work things out.

'Yes, there's room for compromise,' Seel said. 'This is a peace-keeping mission.'