

Tampa Bay Times

County opts for small EMS change



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Don't expect any major changes to Pinellas County's emergency medical services system as officials seek ways to hold down long-term costs.

County commissioners opted Thursday to negotiate limited changes with the 18 cities and fire districts that contract with the county to provide first-response emergency service. They hope those negotiations will lead to bigger savings in the future.

The decision means a proposal that would have firefighters, rather than a private, for-profit ambulance service, take patients to the hospital is off the table. So is a proposal by Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala to make draconian cuts to the system by eliminating multiple fire-based rescue units and their crews from the system. It's been an emotional argument that has had the county, cities, fire districts, firefighters and others locked in a debate for at least the past two years.

Instead, commissioners told LaSala they were interested in the so-called Cares plan, a proposal made by consultants Fitch & Associates. The county paid Fitch almost \$300,000 to study the Pinellas EMS system. Fitch concluded fire-based transport would not work because it would be too work intensive for firefighters and would cost too much to add the necessary personnel. The Fitch study also concluded that the LaSala plan would damage the system and not be sustainable because the cuts were too deep.

Instead, Fitch suggested limiting the number of hours some firefighters work. Fitch has suggested possible savings of about \$6.3 million, or about 5.5 percent of the overall \$112 million EMS budget. But LaSala's first job will be to test that figure.

Many of the firefighters that would see limited work schedules under the Cares plan are paid with municipal dollars, not county EMS funds. So, any savings from limiting their schedules would likely not help the countywide budget. Commissioners told LaSala he needs to figure out how much the countywide savings would be under the proposal.

Commissioners also agreed that the Cares plan is only a first step. The elephant in the room, they said, is the ever increasing cost of the system. That still needs a solution.

"I think (Cares) is not the ultimate answer, but it's a step forward and a welcome step forward," Pinellas County Commission chairman Ken Welch said.

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Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala's proposal to eliminate multiple fire-based rescue units and their crews is off the table.

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