

# County rejects Pinellas Park proposal for fire coverage in High Point



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Saturday, April 20, 2013 4:30am

Saying the savings would not be dramatic, Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala has rejected a Pinellas Park proposal to reduce the cost of fire service in the unincorporated High Point area.

The county is instead forging ahead with its original plan to ask Pinellas Park, Largo, Clearwater and St. Petersburg for formal bids to provide service to the area, east of Largo. The county currently pays Largo and Pinellas Park about \$2.4 million a year to provide fire coverage there.

Under Pinellas Park's proposal, which it shopped to LaSala and county commissioners, High Point would be divided into three pieces along the lines of the annexation planning zones. Pinellas Park would cover the section of High Point in its annexation planning area. Largo and St. Petersburg would provide coverage in the portions that lie within theirs. Each city would charge High Point residents the same property tax rate it charges its own residents for fire service.

Until a complete financial analysis is done, it's impossible to know what the actual savings might be. But, using current figures, it would work this way:

Pinellas Park property owners pay city taxes of about \$5.59 per \$1,000 of assessed, taxable property value. Of that, \$2.36 goes to the Fire Department.

Under the city's proposal, property owners in the Pinellas Park portion of High Point who now pay about \$4.19 per \$1,000 of assessed, taxable property value for fire service would pay about \$2.36. The owner of a \$150,000 home with a \$50,000 homestead exemption would see his property taxes for fire protection decrease from about \$419 per year to about \$236. That's a savings of about 43.7 percent.

St. Petersburg and Largo have not done similar calculations. Savings, if any, for property owners in those areas would likely vary.

LaSala had no written analysis of Pinellas Park's proposal. He told county commissioners during a workshop Thursday that the analysis had been "done on the fly." The analysis showed, he said, "the savings were not dramatic."

LaSala said he "concluded that the best approach is to continue with the (request for proposal) in High Point. . . . It behooves us to look at the submittal or the submittals from the municipalities."

"Maybe they have information we don't," said Pinellas Park city spokesman Tim Caddell. "This proposal makes sense to us. It's definitely worth exploring."

Some county commissioners seemed skeptical of LaSala's conclusion. Janet Long said she thought the proposal was "pretty innovative." Norm Roche asked for a written copy of LaSala's analysis of the proposal. Ken Welch said he wanted to "see what it would take to make the Pinellas Park plan work."

The proposal might not be dead. If savings through the bid process "aren't substantial," LaSala said, the county could re-examine Pinellas Park's proposal.

The county has no fire department, so it contracts with cities and fire districts to provide coverage in 12 unincorporated areas. One of those is High Point, which includes Feather Sound and multiple county-owned properties like the jail, courthouse and Safe Harbor, a homeless shelter run by the sheriff. Those county-owned properties are not taxed and do not contribute to the cost of fire coverage.

The county pays Largo about \$1.1 million a year to cover the west side of High Point out of Fire Station 40 and pays Pinellas Park about \$1.3 million each year to cover the eastern side out of Fire Station 36.

Last year, the county put out for bid the fire service an unincorporated area in South Pinellas. St. Petersburg won the bid and, this year, homeowners in that area saw fire taxes drop about 79 percent. The county wants to repeat those savings in High Point.

It plans to allow Pinellas Park, Largo, St. Petersburg and Clearwater to propose plans and costs for coverage. St. Petersburg and Clearwater are included because they are contiguous to the area. Proposals could include covering the whole area or just part of it.

Pinellas Park stands to take the biggest hit from a change in coverage. If any other department takes over or eliminates Station 36, the 11 firefighters and one fire inspector there would likely lose their jobs. And, if the winning bidder also chose to supply emergency medical services as part of the deal, Pinellas Park would also lose funding for Fire Station 37 where seven firefighter-paramedics are based. Those 18 firefighters comprise about 24 percent of Pinellas Park's 75-member frontline force, which officials there say is already running lean.

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