

EMS flier fans the flames in Lealman

A commissioner calls it scare tactics. Lealman's fire chief calls it informing the public.

BY ANNE LINDBERG-4/2/14

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LEALMAN - A county commissioner has charged that firefighters here 'should be ashamed of themselves' for using scare tactics to fight proposed cuts to Pinellas' emergency medical services system.

Pinellas Commissioner Janet Long made her statements Monday after seeing a flier that Lealman fire officials handed out in Five Towns, a condominium community for seniors. Among other things, the flier urges Five Towns' residents to 'call today to save your fire and EMS service.' It goes on to say, 'If you do not want to lose your current level of EMS and fire service at night or in the future, then please call each of the county commissioners today. ... You must tell each county commissioner two things: 1 - Do not remove Lealman's Rescue 19 at night. 2 - Do NOT vote for the Cares 2 plan.' Cares 2 is the name Pinellas officials have given a proposal by County Administrator Bob LaSala to cut about \$2.3 million out of the \$40 million in property taxes that help fund the overall \$116 million EMS budget.

The flier and the implication that people will get worse EMS service if the cuts take effect are untrue and meant to 'incite our elderly population with fear,' Long said.

'I think it's immoral,' she said. 'The County Commission is as concerned about our (residents' wellbeing as anyone). For anyone to suggest we're putting that in jeopardy is foolish and irresponsible.' It's a complex issue, Long said, that is made more difficult by rising costs.

'Everyone has had to do more with less, except for them,' she said, referring to the firefighter/paramedics who provide first response EMS service.

She added, 'At the end of the day, there's a finite number we can charge our citizens in terms of taxes. It's not an endless supply. ... I doubt seriously the firefighters explained all the nuts and bolts of this Cares 2 plan. They just frightened them unnecessarily. And they should be ashamed of themselves.' Lealman fire Chief Rick Graham said the flier is part of a public education program to let taxpayers know what's happening and the likely results from the proposed cuts.

'I'm not going out there and trying to scare people. No one in this department is trying to scare people,' Graham said. 'I do believe this is a taxpayer issue, and the people paying the bill should get the service they want. ... If you're going to cut their service, tell them you're going to cut their service.' Graham added, 'Do I think it puts people at risk? Yes. ... Cares 2 is bad for the entire county.' Graham's comments echo those made by other fire and city officials who have analyzed the impact of the proposal, which would see cuts to the five busiest departments -

Lealman, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo and Pinellas Park. In addition, the county would freeze payments for three years to all 18 fire departments that provide first response EMS service. For the seven years after, the county would cap the amount EMS budgets could be increased.

In Lealman's case, the county wants to lop \$285,454 out of the district's \$2.2 million EMS budget over the next three years. But the effect is much worse, Graham said. He estimates the cuts and the freeze will amount to about \$861,000 over the next three years and about \$4.3 million over the 10-year life of the plan.

But, he and other officials say the real concern is the effect of the proposal on service.

Under the current system, the county pays Lealman to staff Rescue 19 (a rescue is the boxy truck resembling an ambulance) with two firefighter-paramedics 24 hours a day. Under Cares 2, the county would pay for one firefighter 24 hours a day and one for 14 hours a day. That would mean between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., only one firefighter would be paid with EMS money. The county has suggested that firefighter ride the fire truck during those hours.

The proposal leaves Lealman with a dilemma: Shut the rescue off during those hours and use the fire truck to run the calls that are now being answered by both vehicles or use fire taxes to pay the other paramedic on the rescue during those hours.

Shutting off the rescue, Graham says, would mean that it will take longer to answer emergency medical and fire calls.

If Lealman instead shifts the loss of funds from the cuts and the freeze, the district's property taxes would go up. That would be unfair to Lealman taxpayers, Graham said. Not only does Lealman have some of the poorest residents in the county, shifting the tax burden amounts to double taxation - with Lealman residents paying twice for a countywide service; once by their EMS tax and again through their fire tax, he said.

If that's what the taxpayers want, that's fine, Graham said. They just need to know what the options are under the proposal.

'Everyone should know what they're getting into,' Graham said. 'Eyes wide open.'

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