

# Editorial: EMS agreement better than nothing, but more work needed

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DIRK SHADD | Times

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The proposed three-year agreement between St. Petersburg and Pinellas County to temporarily resolve years of discord over emergency medical services is a step in the right direction, but it does not solve the ultimate problem: Pinellas' EMS system is too expensive and will not be sustainable long-term. Even if the county can ink similar deals with the other 17 fire departments that provide EMS, officials still must work toward an effective, permanent solution that rewards, rather than discourages, efficiencies.

Leadership changes in St. Petersburg and the county opened the door to this week's agreement, but so did a change in county commissioners' attitudes and the economy. For several years the commission had watched EMS costs grow faster than the receipts from a countywide EMS property tax that reimburses fire departments. Part of the reason? Under the system, the county's 18 fire departments shipped individual bills to the county for reimbursement with few checks and balances on whether operations were run efficiently.

But the commission's hard-line approach mellowed as the economy improved and after it fired County Administrator Bob LaSala in April and replaced him with Interim County Administrator

Mark Woodard. At the same time, Rick Kriseman, who succeeded Bill Foster as St. Petersburg mayor in January, was researching the EMS dispute.

Kriseman and Woodard met for negotiations on a recent Sunday to see how much of each other's top priorities they could satisfy. The resulting three-year agreement would start in October, with the option of two one-year extensions. The agreement merely caps compensation for the next three years.

This year St. Petersburg's EMS compensation budget is \$12.5 million. Under the agreement, the city would get \$11.8 million next year, \$12.8 million the second year and \$13.6 million the third year and decide how to spend it. If the agreement is extended beyond three years, an inflation adjustment will restrict how high the compensation can go. With lower pension costs and spending efficiencies, Kriseman said the city will not have to reduce EMS services. And the city also agreed to draw down a \$1.75 million EMS reserve fund it has been holding to buy equipment.

But there is a significant escape clause that would allow negotiations to be reopened if the city's EMS expenses exceeded those projected amounts. If the two sides couldn't agree on a new figure, the agreement would terminate in 30 days — and the city and county would be right back where they started with a system that has too few checks on how much fire departments can bill the system.

The St. Petersburg City Council unanimously approved the agreement this week and it awaits a County Commission vote. Meanwhile, negotiations with the 17 other departments have begun. So far, there is no evidence they will support a similar agreement.

A short-term agreement that resolves some issues is better than none at all. But all sides need to commit to a conversation about finding a long-term, sustainable solution where fire departments have an incentive to be efficient in deploying resources, not just sending in a bill.

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