

# Tampa Bay Times

## Four Pinellas fire districts form council



Anne Lindberg, Times Staff Writer

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Four districts responsible for providing fire protection and emergency medical service to residents of unincorporated Pinellas County have formed a political coalition designed to advocate for residents in their areas.

The four — Lealman, Pinellas Suncoast, Palm Harbor and East Lake — represent people in all areas of unincorporated Pinellas from south county to the beaches to north county.

The Council of Special Fire Districts of Pinellas was formed in response to the ongoing fire and EMS issues within the county. More specifically, the formation has come at a time when EMS has become a high profile issue with the county looking for ways to cut costs.

The four districts cover a population of about 158,100 and together they have about 183 in personnel. Land value in the four districts is estimated at \$9.9 billion, according to council data.

Fire and EMS services in Pinellas are provided by 18 fire departments. Of those, 14 are city-based with municipal taxes paying for fire coverage and a countywide tax for EMS.

Four of the 18 are so-called independent districts because they are governed by popularly elected boards with the ability to levy taxes or fees to provide fire protection in their areas. Like the city departments, the independents receive money from the countywide EMS tax to provide emergency services.

"Over the years I have witnessed the four fire districts working with local and state officials independently on issues of common interest," Palm Harbor fire Commissioner Norm Atherton said.

"It was my goal with this Council to allow us to work on these issues collectively."

In a debate that has consumed major amounts of county time and money, the independent districts have come into their own with high-profile stands on various issues. The districts also provided the seed bed for a movement to allow firefighters to take patients to the hospital.

Under the current system, ambulances take patients to hospitals. But under a proposed plan created by Lt. Scott Sanford of Palm Harbor and Capt. Jim Millican of Lealman, firefighters would take over those duties.

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### Fast facts

### Meeting Wednesday

A meeting of the EMS Special Committee has been set for 3:30 p.m. Wed. July 17 in Room 130 of the Sunstar Paramedics headquarters, 12490 Ulmerton Road, to review a final report on Pinellas County's emergency

medical services system by Fitch & Associates. The meeting is open to the public.

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