

Tampa Bay Times

Largo is ready to fight Pinellas to adequately fund EMS



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LARGO — City Commission members say Pinellas County's refusal to negotiate over proposed cuts to the emergency medical services system is pushing them closer to a lawsuit they hope would force the county to provide more funding.

The Largo commissioners' comments come just days before they're scheduled to discuss Tuesday a county proposal to cut the funds the city gets to provide first-response EMS service.

Their comments also come two days after they received a letter from Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala denying the city's request for the county to reconsider the cuts.

"I'm a little discouraged, to say the least, by that response (but) I can't say I expected any different," Largo Mayor Pat Gerard said Thursday. "I appreciate they have to do something to control the costs. . . . We're willing to negotiate but we're not willing to take the burden when they're cutting the busiest units in the county."

LaSala's response, she said, "probably" does push the city closer to filing a lawsuit.

City Commissioner Harriet Crozier said she, too, was disappointed by LaSala's response but wasn't surprised. The county, she said, isn't willing to negotiate.

"I figured his answer was going to be 'no, no, no, no, no,' " Crozier said. "I did not expect any kind of give or take or, 'Oh, my God, I overlooked that.' "

LaSala has proposed cutting about \$2.3 million from the overall \$116 million EMS budget. Those cuts are aimed at the \$40 million that comes from a countywide EMS property tax earmarked for the 18 cities and fire districts that provide first-response service.

Under LaSala's proposal, the five busiest departments — Largo, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Pinellas Park and Lealman — would have their budgets slashed over the next three years. Seminole would also see a reduction.

In addition to the cuts, LaSala wants to freeze the budgets of all 18 departments for the next three years. He would then cap the increases the departments get for the subsequent seven years.



Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala last week denied Largo's request to reconsider the EMS cuts.

In Largo's case, that's a chop of about \$525,000 from the city's \$4.2 million EMS budget, about 12.5 percent. But Largo officials say that's understating the real impact. The actual effect of the cuts and freeze is a loss of about \$2.1 million — half the current budget — over the next three years. In the next 10 years, they say, Largo would lose more than \$9 million in funding.

The real loss, they say, comes from the impact on service. Losing that much funding could mean a reduction in the number of paramedics on the street, which could mean it will take longer for people to get help. And those firefighter-paramedics will be stretched and stressed by the workload.

One alternative would be for the city to replace the funding. But that, City Commissioner Woody Brown said, is unfair to city taxpayers who are already paying the county tax for a county service.

"What they're proposing would save the county money but it wouldn't save the taxpayers money," Brown said. "They're just trying to change funding from the county to the municipalities."

He added, "It's just not doable. . . . Our municipality would have to either find that money or drastically change the way we do business. . . . They're unapologetic about the reduction in service that their proposal results in."

Brown said he believes the city would be on strong legal grounds to fight the proposal.

"The numbers are definitely challengeable," he said. "If it takes going to court to (do that), then so be it."

Commissioner Crozier added, "We're not just standing up and saying, 'No we don't want this.' There are a lot of glaring issues out there where I don't feel comfortable putting my employees and our residents at risk."

Crozier said she's willing to listen to what the county has to say Tuesday. Though the option of filing a lawsuit is not on the agenda for Tuesday's meeting, Crozier said "somebody could throw that motion out there" if the conversation seems to be going nowhere.

"I will, if somebody else doesn't," Crozier said. "Don't be surprised. Why should we keep going round and round?"

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Meeting Tuesday

The Largo City Commission is scheduled to discuss a county proposal to cut funding to the emergency medical services system during a meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday. The meeting, which is open to the public, will be in the commission chambers at Largo City Hall, 201 Highland Ave. For information, or to contact the Largo City Commission, call (727) 587-6702 or email commission@largo.com.

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