

Opponents of EMS plan may team up

Four cities and Lealman are discussing options for fighting the county proposal.

BY ANNE LINDBERG-4/20/14

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Battle lines are being drawn over a proposal to make sweeping changes designed to hold down the costs of Pinellas' emergency medical services system.

The Largo City Commission voted unanimously Tuesday to take Pinellas County to mediation over the proposal. Largo has invited the other departments and districts that provide first response EMS service to the mediation table, which could be a first step to a lawsuit.

The Lealman Fire Commission has already empowered Chairwoman Kathleen Litton to take steps to join Largo.

The Clearwater City Council is scheduled to hold a special meeting Monday to decide whether to join Largo. Pinellas Park is scheduled to discuss the issue at a workshop Tuesday.

It's unclear when St. Petersburg will decide. Officials there say they have not received formal notice of Largo's action and cannot act until they do. But the St. Petersburg council there has already said it might sue if talks between the county and Mayor Rick Kriseman fall through.

The plan would cut about \$2.3 million from the overall \$116 million EMS budget. The proposed cuts are aimed at the \$40 million that comes into the system from a countywide EMS property tax. The county has earmarked that tax money for the 18 cities and independent fire districts that provide first response EMS service.

The bulk of the cuts would be spread over the next three years from the five departments that provide about 70 percent of the county's first response EMS - St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman.

The plan would also freeze the budgets of all 18 departments for three years and cap budget increases for the subsequent seven years. Former County Administrator Bob LaSala estimated the total savings to be about \$60 million over the 10-year life of the plan.

The cuts for the five main EMS providers would come from a radical change. Under the existing system, the county pays for 24-hour shifts for firefighter-paramedics who are paid with EMS money. Under the proposal, the county would still pay for some. But others would be paid only for 14-hour days.

The county has suggested moving some of the 24-hour firefighters to vehicles that respond to

fire for the 10 hours when the other EMS firefighters are off the county payroll.

The effect would be to have fewer firefighter-paramedics on the streets between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. The county says that's okay because there are fewer emergency calls during those hours. But opponents say taking firefighter-paramedics off the street means that sick people will have to wait longer for emergency medical help.

'Someone's going to go to those calls,' Pinellas Park Fire Chief Guy Keirn said. But, because the nearest help could be tied up on another call, the response could come from 'someone from farther away, so it's going to take longer.'

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