

## **Pinellas Park to fight county's EMS plan**

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PINELLAS PARK - Council members here voted unanimously Thursday to take the county to the bargaining table over a proposal to change the way Pinellas' emergency medical services system is funded.

The conflict resolution process that Pinellas Park council members kicked off is required by state law before two governmental bodies file lawsuits. Pinellas Park is at least the fifth government to take the step over the EMS proposal. Earlier this month, Largo voted to take Pinellas to the bargaining table. Since then, Safety Harbor and two independent fire districts Pinellas Suncoast and Lealman - have decided to join.

Pinellas Park council members decided to independently deal with the county. City attorney Jim Denhardt said he thought that would give Pinellas Park a better opportunity to have its concerns heard.

The county has proposed changing the way it pays for the firefighter-paramedics who provide first response EMS service in Pinellas' five busiest departments - Pinellas Park, Largo, St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Lealman. Rather than paying for 24-hour shifts for all EMSfunded firefighters, the county wants to pay some for 24-hour shifts and others for 14-hour shifts. The effect is to take those firefighters and those vehicles off the street - a move that fire officials say will mean longer wait times. The alternative is for the departments to continue paying those firefighters out of fire money. That would be a form of double taxation, Pinellas Park and others say, because it would force city and district taxpayers to pay twice for EMS - once in their countywide EMS property tax and again in their fire tax.

'It's not fair and equitable,' Pinellas Park council member Rick Butler said.