

Pinellas shifts stance on EMS

A new plan would set performance standards but also offer flexibility.

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Staff members are working on what the interim county administrator describes as a 'sea change' in the way Pinellas handles the emergency medical services system.

The philosophical shift would see the county providing funds for the system and setting performance standards. The 18 cities and fire districts that provide EMS service would then determine how they would use that money to provide EMS service and meet the performance requirements. One such is that they answer medical calls within 7½ minutes 90 percent of the time - a requirement under the current system.

'It's really about, how much are we going to pay?' interim County Administrator Mark Woodard said Thursday. 'That's kind of a sea change. ... That is a shift.' Previous county administrator Bob LaSala, who was fired two weeks ago, was pushing a plan that cut EMS budgets and dictated how the money would be used.

The prospect of a philosophical change at the county level comes as a bit of good news for county fire officials.

'That provides some encouragement, but the discussion is still about funding,' said Bert Polk, head of the Pinellas Fire Chiefs Association. 'I think this will all rest in their final funding proposals.' Polk, chief of the Pinellas Suncoast Fire & Rescue District, added, 'I still believe there is going to be considerable ground

to cover.' The concept of the county paying for EMS service, which has an overall budget of \$116 million, and allowing the departments to decide how to best deliver the service is not a new one. It's the idea that drove the way the system is set up - with Pinellas collecting a countywide EMS property tax and disbursing the funds to the cities and districts.

But the county had gotten away from that in recent years under LaSala.

His latest proposal, for example, chose fire stations where the county said there were too many firefighter-paramedics late at night. The county said it would no longer pay all the firefighter-paramedics in those stations for 24-hour shifts. Some, the county said, would be paid only for 14-hour shifts. Those cuts, totalling about \$2.3 million over three years, were aimed at the five busiest departments - St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman. The proposal also placed a three-year freeze on payments to all 18 departments.

Woodard said that, under his new philosophy, the part of the proposal that would decide the length of shifts for firefighters would be off the table. It's too early to tell, he said, whether the proposed cuts and freeze will remain in the discussion.

'We are looking hard at those two key elements,' he said.

What stays on the table, Woodard said, depends on what is the best way financially to make sure the EMS system is sustainable in the long run.

Some indication of what that might look like could come as early as Friday when Woodard and St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman are scheduled to meet to talk about LaSala's proposal. Kriseman has said he and Woodard are on the verge of an agreement over the funding.

Polk said he hopes the county isn't trying to cut a deal with St. Petersburg, hoping that the other 17 providers will fall into line.

'It's going to depend on what any agreement with St. Pete looks like. But I don't know that an agreement with St. Pete equates to 'We've solved the whole countywide problem,' ' Polk said.

As for the rest of the departments, he said, 'We're being ignored.' That won't be for long. Largo, [Pinellas](#) Park and Lealman have voted to take the [county](#) through a dispute resolution process over the proposal. The process is a mandatory step before governments can sue each other. So far, [Pinellas](#) Suncoast, East Lake and Safety Harbor have voted to join the process.