

Pinellas may take EMS cuts off the table

[Anne Lindberg, Times Staff Writer](#)

Tuesday, May 27, 2014 6:40pm

A proposal to cut emergency medical services funding to six fire departments could be shelved, according to Pinellas County staff members.

But the county is holding firm on two other proposals: a three-year freeze on the budgets of all 18 departments that provide first-response emergency medical services, and a cap on the amount of budget increases for seven years after the freeze is lifted.

The county has proposed cutting about \$2.3 million over the next three years from the approximately \$40 million collected from a countywide property tax that pays for part of the \$116 million EMS system. County officials have estimated the cuts, freeze and caps would save about \$60 million over the next 10 years.

Under the proposal, the five busiest departments — St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman — are facing cuts. The county is also proposing that they reduce the number of firefighter/paramedics on the streets from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. as a way to save money. Seminole is also facing cuts but not a staffing adjustment.

Seminole did not object to the cuts, but the other five did. They said the cuts and the proposal to reduce staffing violated the state statute that created the EMS system and requires the county to adequately fund it. They also argued that the proposal to change the staffing would result in reduced service and longer wait times for the sick and injured who called for help.

On Tuesday, Bruce Moeller, the county's executive director of safety and emergency services, said the county had never intended to micromanage the daily operations of the five departments. The proposal, he said, was "fiscal ... not operational," and the plan to take firefighters off the streets only "showed a path" to a way to cut costs.

In any case, the plan to reduce staffing was dropped when Moeller said "county staff is ready to recommend that (cuts) not be on the table." The County Commission will make the final decision whether to impose the cuts.

It was the first time since the county proposed its plan in February that officials appeared flexible over any part of the program. Until now, county staff had followed the lead of former County

Administrator Bob LaSala, who said he was only following the commission's orders and had no authority to negotiate with the various departments. LaSala was fired in April.

Moeller's comments were made during a mediation session between the county and eight departments. The session was a part of the conflict resolution process that state law requires before governments sue each other. The idea is to bring everyone to the table to try to work out their differences before appearing before a judge.

Anne Lindberg can be reached at alindberg@tampabay.com or (727) 893-8450. Follow @alindbergtimes on Twitter.

Pinellas may take EMS cuts off the table 05/27/14 [Last modified: Tuesday, May 27, 2014 11:03pm]