

St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman: City, county have tentative agreement on EMS funding

Thursday, May 29, 2014 12:09pm

ST. PETERSBURG — The county and the city have the skeleton of a deal on paying for the emergency medical services system, but it has to be nailed down in writing by Thursday or Mayor Rick Kriseman says he'll recommend St. Petersburg sue.

"We have an agreement in principle," Kriseman said Thursday. "I really do believe that we're going to get it done."

St. Petersburg and Pinellas County have been at odds since February over a county proposal to cut about \$2.3 million off the \$116 million EMS budget.

Under the proposal, the five busiest departments — St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman — would have their budgets slashed and would see their firefighter-paramedic staffing reduced from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. as a way to save personnel costs. Seminole would also see a budget cut but its staffing would not be affected.

The plan would also freeze the budgets of all 18 departments that provide first response EMS service for the next three years. For the seven years after that, budget increases for all 18 would be capped. The county has estimated the plan would save about \$60 million over the 10-year life of the contract.

The proposal has proved unpopular with the cities and fire districts that provide first response EMS service. Cutting personnel, they said, would mean that sick and injured people would wait longer for help to arrive. And cutting the budgets would only shift the costs of a countywide system to individual cities and districts to make up the loss. That, they said, would result in double taxation for their property owners.

Eight cities and fire districts have voted to take the county to court over the issue. The first meeting of a conflict resolution process, the step required by state law before governments can sue each other, was held Tuesday. Bruce Moeller, the county's public safety services director, said then that Pinellas is willing to forego the budget and staffing cuts. That left the proposed freeze and caps on the table.

Moeller agreed that the county and St. Petersburg have the bare bones of an agreement that is similar, in some ways, to his representations on Tuesday: The staff cuts are off the table as are

the budget cuts. The freeze is also off the table. The subsequent cap is still under discussion as are other issues. The county has also agreed to a shorter term on the contract — three years with a two-year renewal rather than a five-year contract with a five-year renewal.

In return, St. Petersburg would agree to voluntarily reduce some of its EMS spending in some years and hold the line in others as a way of avoiding the budget cuts and the imposition of a freeze.

"We've committed to get them where they need to go" financially, Kriseman said.

The agreement and all its details must be hammered out in writing by next Thursday when the St. Petersburg City Council is scheduled to meet. If it isn't, Kriseman said he would recommend the council kick off the conflict resolution process.

"We're at a point where there's no reason we shouldn't get it done by Thursday," Kriseman said.

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