

St. Petersburg council ready to vote on EMS agreement with Pinellas

ST. PETERSBURG — Mayor Rick Kriseman and Pinellas County officials have reached a deal over funding for first response emergency medical services provided by St. Petersburg firefighter-paramedics.

In so doing, they have headed off the possibility of a lawsuit between the city and county. Kriseman had told a subcommittee of the City Council that, should he not reach an agreement with the county by Thursday, he would recommend St. Petersburg sue. Kriseman and county officials met Sunday and hammered out an agreement that city attorneys spent the week vetting.

By the time Thursday rolled around, St. Petersburg fire Chief Jim Large told the council an agreement had been reached. He said they would receive a copy of it Friday so they could look over it before voting on it at next Thursday's meeting. The County Commission would still have to vote on it for it to become final.

The agreement would calm — at least temporarily — the dispute between St. Petersburg and Pinellas over EMS costs. Still roiling are battles with many of the other 17 fire departments that provide Pinellas with first-response EMS service.

EMS funding has been an ongoing dispute for the past several years with county officials blaming fire departments, who are paid with a countywide EMS property tax, for escalating costs.

The issue has blown even higher this year as county officials have sought to slash funding to five fire departments — St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman. They also wanted those departments to cut personnel and rescue vehicles. County officials also proposed cutting Seminole's budget but did not recommend a reduction in that department's personnel.

The county also suggested a three-year freeze for all 18 departments followed by seven years when increases to EMS budgets would be capped.

Several departments, including Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman, have forced the county to the negotiating table over the proposal. The move is required by state law before governments can sue each other. That process is continuing.

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