

# Three candidates, three EMS plans for Pinellas

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Saturday, August 9, 2014 10:27pm



SCOTT KEELER | Times (2011)

One candidate says it doesn't make sense to buy rescue trucks and then not use them for the designed purpose.

The debate on how Pinellas County can get a handle on rising costs for the emergency medical services system has made its way into the race for the at-large County Commission seat.

Two of the candidates, incumbent Norm Roche and challenger Ed Hooper, an outgoing state representative and former firefighter, are facing off in the Aug. 26 Republican primary. The winner will face outgoing Largo Mayor Pat Gerard, a Democrat, in the Nov. 4 general election. They have all staked out distinct positions on the EMS question.

The debate over EMS has become heated at times between Hooper and Gerard, and began earlier this year.

Hooper proposed a hybrid plan that, among other things, would allow fire departments that have transport-ready vehicles to take patients to the hospital. Under the current system, all medical transport is done by a for-profit company that contracts with the county to provide the service. Fire departments are banned from transporting, even if they have transport-capable units, except in rare circumstances.

"The county pays a pretty good lick for all those rescue trucks that can't transport," Hooper said. The situation is that "we're going to buy this nice new vehicle but not use it for what it's (designed) to do. That doesn't make any sense."

Fire departments that have no transport-capable vehicles and no desire to transport still would rely on the private ambulance company. In those cases, he said, the ambulances would be stationed at fire stations, where the paramedics could stay until sent on a call. As things are now, ambulances are moved around the county and can be seen at convenience stores and other places waiting for a call. The ambulance paramedics sit in the vehicle with the engine on and air conditioner running while they wait.

Allowing those paramedics to relax at stations until they're needed provides "a better quality of life for those ambulance employees," Hooper said. There would also be savings in gas, and less wear and tear on the ambulances. And because fire stations are located around the county, response times would not be affected.

Roche also favors fire transport, but he sees it as an "all or nothing" proposal. Either all departments transport, he said, or no department takes patients to the hospital.

Hooper's proposal, he said, would bring back the problems of the past, when fire departments refused to serve anyone but their own citizens. The end result would be "haphazard transport," he said.

"I think it's flawed," Roche said of Hooper's plan. "Going backwards is not the right path to move forward."

Gerard said she believes the issue is "much more complicated than either side, certainly the fire side, talks about."

One complicating factor, she said, is the way the ambulance side of the system is financed. Paramedics Plus provides both emergency and nonemergency transport. Nonemergency transportation involves taking patients from one hospital to another, to a doctor's office or even out of county to another medical center. The county bills for both emergency and nonemergency transport, but Gerard said she believes the bulk of the revenue comes from nonemergency transport.

"I don't see our fire people doing that," Gerard said. That means fire would transport emergencies and the private ambulance company would continue to be in charge of nonemergency transport. But the finances of that would likely make the system unsustainable, she said.

The contract with the ambulance company is up next year. So it's likely that whoever wins the seat will vote on whether to renew the contract. If the county could "strike a decent deal with them, I would have them stay," she said.

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**Candidates chime in on EMS**

The *Tampa Bay Times* editorial board asked candidates in the Aug. 26 election for their opinions about Pinellas County's emergency medical services system. Below is the question and excerpts from their comments.

**The county has struggled for years to reduce costs and raise money to pay for emergency medical services. What adjustments would you make to the EMS system and how would you ensure its long-term future?**

#### **District 4**

##### **Dave Eggers**

I have often thought that public safety is the last place to privatize government services, and yet we have done so with EMS. It may be time to look at the viability of bringing transport back to the local fire stations.

##### **Johnny Johnson**

Sincere dialogue on finding solutions to cooperative agreements and differences are needed. Our quality of life cannot be compromised. These efforts would result in lowered cost of services, which would provide savings that could be used to pay for the same top quality of services of which we expect and deserve.

##### **Tim Keffalas**

I believe, as do many voters I spoke with, that we need to streamline services and salaries, as most industries have done in recent years. I am not saying to cut salaries; I am suggesting that we need to make sure salaries are not out of line with other agencies with similar functions. I feel we need to review the practicality of the equipment and if costs can be cut there.

##### **Wanda Kimsey**

I would like to consider researching the financial feasibility of having the fire stations take over ambulance services.

##### **Macho Liberti**

Currently, we are contracting with a private ambulance company for all transport services, emergency and nonemergency, of patients. They are collecting a profit out of our EMS system. This needs to stop.

##### **Peter Nehr**

There seems to be a problem sustaining the benefits regarding retirement, etc. We should also seek to consolidate as many areas as we can. Consolidation may be the best long-term solution.

**Jim Ronecker**

I would like to see the fire departments be able to transport advance life support patients and the ambulance service deal with basic life support. In doing so, there would be a savings to the taxpayer, as the fire departments would be able to charge for the transport, offsetting expenses by obtaining additional funding. . . . Finding ways to reduce pension costs also would go a long way in assisting in the ability to afford the services people expect.

**District 6****John Morroni**

This is currently being brought to the cities and fire districts for approval, and St. Petersburg has been the first to approve. Hopefully, the others will agree.

**Tom Rask**

Based on what I know, I am for fire transport. We have a good system, but there is definitely room for cost savings and/or efficiency improvements.

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