

Three-year EMS deal goes to St. Petersburg City Council

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ST. PETERSBURG — City Council members are poised to vote on a proposal that could temporarily halt the battles between St. Petersburg and the county over the funding of emergency medical services.

"We feel that this agreement is a win-win for the county, the city and all the citizens that reside in both jurisdictions, and it's a demonstration that governments can work," St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman said.

The agreement won't become binding until approved by both the St. Petersburg council and the Pinellas County Commission. Council approval is expected today during the group's 3 p.m. meeting. The County Commission could vote as early as Tuesday.

The agreement, which Kriseman hammered out with county representatives during a 2½-hour session on a Sunday afternoon, would be the first reached this year with any of the 18 fire departments that provide first-response EMS service. Negotiations with the other 17 are ongoing.

County officials have battled with the 18 cities and fire districts over EMS funding for several years. The result has been a series of one-year agreements designed to keep the system running while larger issues are resolved.

This year, the battle reached a fever pitch with a county proposal to slash funding to the five largest providers of first-response EMS service — St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman. The proposal involved recommended cuts to service and a suggested elimination of some firefighter-paramedic positions. The county also proposed cutting Seminole's budget but did not recommend service or personnel cutbacks.

The proposal included a three-year freeze on the budgets of all 18 departments and a cap on increases in the subsequent seven years. The county proposed a five-year contract with a five-year extension.

County officials refused to negotiate for several months. Then-County Administrator Bob LaSala said the County Commission was refusing to allow him to negotiate. But, after he was terminated, the atmosphere thawed. That has been especially true where St. Petersburg was concerned, with county officials backing off from almost all their demands.

Under the proposed agreement, St. Petersburg would receive \$708,988, or about 5.7 percent, less in the upcoming 2014-15 fiscal year. The city is currently receiving about \$12.5 million for providing first response EMS service to the city. Under the proposed contract, it would receive about \$11.8 million for 2014-15.

The agreement projects an increase of about \$997,460 — or about 8.4 percent more — for the 2015-16 fiscal year. St. Petersburg is projected to receive another increase of about \$784,300 — or about 6.1 percent — in the 2016-17 fiscal year.

Those figures are not frozen. The contract contains a clause that allows the city to reopen negotiations and ask for more money should the fiscal picture prove worse than expected.

St. Petersburg also receives about \$603,350 each year for providing service to the east High Point area. High Point is an unincorporated area north of St. Petersburg and west of Feather Sound along the Ulmerton Road corridor. That funding would remain static.

The contract would run for three years with a two-year renewal.

Bruce Moeller, the county's public safety services director, could not be reached for comment.

Kriseman said both sides worked toward two main goals: letting the county get control of spending while ensuring that St. Petersburg's residents continue to receive the same level of service.

"I'm really pleased, though. I think we all came together with the same goal in mind. That's the way it's supposed to work," Kriseman said. "We sat down. We talked about what we wanted to accomplish together. We worked towards it and we did it."

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