

Tampa Bay Times

Largo commission ready to vote on Pinellas EMS plan



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LARGO — City commissioners here are ready to pressure the county to come to the bargaining table for talks about proposed funding cuts to the Pinellas emergency medical services system.

They have scheduled a vote for Tuesday that would bring city and county commissioners together to mediate their differences. Thus far, city officials say, Pinellas County staff members have refused to negotiate over the proposed cuts.

The vote could be a first step toward a lawsuit if the mediation fails. State law requires mediation before two governmental bodies go to court.

"It'll be up to the commission to decide what to do" if Largo and the county can't agree, City Manager Mac Craig said Thursday.

Largo could have company. Officials from other cities and fire districts have been equally upset about the proposed cuts, and elected officials from St. Petersburg, Pinellas Park and Lealman have said they, too, would consider suing if the county refuses to bargain. Pinellas Park officials will hold a workshop April 22 to discuss the EMS issue, and a vote could follow on April 24. Lealman commission members have not scheduled a vote.

Clearwater also faces cuts but has not met to discuss them. It's unclear when that might happen.

St. Petersburg council members gave Mayor Rick Kriseman a month to try negotiating with Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala. Kriseman said Friday he has offered to support the plan if the county readjusts the base amount it pays St. Petersburg for EMS. But Kriseman said that LaSala told him the County Commission has not empowered him to negotiate.

Kriseman said he will continue to try working things out with LaSala and expects to go back to his council in early May. He said the council will likely either approve an agreement or okay filing suit.

LaSala has proposed cutting about \$2.3 million over the next three years from the overall \$116 million EMS budget. Those cuts are aimed at the \$40 million that comes from a countywide EMS property tax that Pinellas earmarks for the 18 city and district fire departments that provide first-response service.

LaSala wants to cut the budgets of the five departments — Largo, Clearwater, Pinellas Park, St. Petersburg and Lealman — that answer 70 percent of the 150,000-plus fire and EMS calls in the county. Seminole would also see a reduction.

LaSala also wants to freeze the budgets of all 18 departments for the next three years. He would then cap the increases the 18 departments get for the subsequent seven years. He projects an overall savings of about \$60 million over the 10-year period of the plan.

For Largo, that's about a 12.5 percent slice — \$525,000 — from the city's \$4.2 million EMS budget. But fire Chief Shelby Willis says the compound effect of the chop and the freeze are much worse: about \$2 million over three years and about \$9 million over the 10-year span.

That's a loss the system can't sustain without severely reducing service, city officials say. Nor, they say, should they shift a county responsibility to the city fire budget to make up the loss.

County officials say service will not be severely impacted, although they concede that, on average, it will take about 11 seconds longer for help to get to sick people than it does now.

But Willis and other fire officials say that figure is misleading. In one area around Belcher Road and East Bay Drive, Willis estimated that, on average, patients would wait up to a minute and a half more for a firefighter-paramedic.

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If you're interested

The Largo City Commission is scheduled to vote on whether to take Pinellas County to the bargaining table over proposed cuts to the emergency medical services system. The meeting is at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Largo City Hall, 201 Highland Ave. The meeting is open to the public. For information, call (727) 587-6702.

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