



Pinellas County may seek another EMS tax increase



Anne Lindberg, Times Staff Writer



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A little more than six months after commissioners hiked the emergency medical services tax rate by 46 percent, Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala says he plans to ask for another increase.

And, unless there are changes to the system or costs are cut, LaSala said county commissioners will have to consider asking the Legislature to increase the limit on the EMS tax rate.

That would mean property taxes could go higher someday.

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"Based on our financial forecast and the decline in property tax revenue ... there will not be enough revenue to support the expenditures" in the coming fiscal year, LaSala said Thursday.

It's unclear if LaSala will get the increase. Four of the seven commissioners are running for re-election. Three have active opponents.

Ken Welch, up for re-election, said the commission has several choices other than raising taxes.

"The reserves are an option," Welch said. "That's probably the path I think we'd take, but you never know."

Neil Brickfield, who is also running, said LaSala's announcement that he plans to ask for an increase came as no surprise, but commissioners said last year they would not increase the tax rate again this year.

"I think it's a reasonable expectation that (taxes) won't be increasing," Brickfield said.

The 18 cities and fire districts that provide first response EMS service say they are doing their best to hold down costs. Earlier this month, they submitted preliminary budget requests for the 2012-13 fiscal year. The total requests for all 18 increased by about \$2.1 million, or about 5.5 percent, from about \$38.2 million to about \$40.3 million.

Of the requests submitted, three are for less than what they received this year. One is for the same amount. And three want increases of less than 1 percent.

St. Pete Beach asked for an 18.9 percent increase that Chief Dan Graves said reflects the need to buy a rescue vehicle. Rescue vehicles, which resemble ambulances, cost about \$150,000.

Acting EMS Chief Steve Girk of St. Petersburg Fire and Rescue said his department's request is up about 5 percent because it plans to buy two rescue vehicles.

County records show Lealman is asking for a 21.7 percent increase for itself and a 16.3 percent increase for Tierra Verde, which it serves. Chief Rick Graham said that's misleading. This year's figure is artificially low because it doesn't take into account money that was left over from previous years. The actual requests, he said, show a decrease in Tierra Verde and about a 3 percent increase for Lealman.

LaSala has said cutting costs alone is not enough to sustain the system in the long run. Changes must be made. That could mean restructuring the delivery system, revamping the finance side of things, or both.

LaSala proposed a plan last year that, he said, would reduce costs. He would eliminate some EMS vehicles and pay an equal rate to all departments for firefighter/paramedics. Opponents say his plan would reduce service.

Two firefighters proposed a different plan that would eliminate the ambulance service and allow firefighters to transport patients. LaSala has said the plan will end up costing more.

State Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, created a committee to find consultants to study whether either plan is workable and would save money. The committee is scheduled to meet early next month.

Restructuring the finance side of EMS, LaSala said, could mean many things, such as charging a fee for services.

The \$103 million system is funded by a combination of property taxes and ambulance user fees, paid mostly by tax-funded Medicare and Medicaid programs. The county funnels the property taxes to the fire districts. The ambulance fees pay Paramedics Plus, the private, for-profit company that contracts with the county to take patients to the hospital. Those fees are also used for other items, including county EMS administration, savings and supplementing the property tax money that goes to the fire districts.



LaSala said it's too soon to know if he'll have to raise ambulance fees for what would be the third year in a row. The EMS tax rate paid countywide is about 85 cents per \$1,000 of assessed, taxable property value. A house with an assessed value of \$150,000 and a \$50,000 homestead exemption pays about \$85 a year for EMS services. The rate is capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000.

If the commission takes money from savings this year, it could mean a higher tax rate increase next year. That wouldn't solve any other issues, LaSala said. The same goes for a tax rate increase, which would bring the system closer to the cap without solving the systemic problems.

"We'd be faced with the same set of questions," LaSala said.

What would happen if the tax rate reached the cap?

"You do one of two things, or a combination of both," LaSala said. "You either adjust expenditures or you get the Legislature to pass legislation to adjust the cap. ... I think one of those choices, or both of those choices, is a policy question that the board will have to address."

That discussion could happen fairly soon. The commission will get a financial forecast for 2013-14 in December.

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	CURRENT FUNDING	FY'12-13 REQUEST	PERCENTAGE DIFFERENCE
CLEARWATER	\$5,032,611	\$5,467,634	8.64%
DUNEDIN	\$1,270,766	\$1,274,232	0.27%
EAST LAKE	\$1,238,616	\$1,336,474	7.90%
GULFPORT	\$390,154	\$390,154	0.00%
LARGO	\$3,702,627	\$3,818,193	3.12%
LARGO FOR BELLEAIR BLUFFS*	\$445,492	\$430,866	-3.28%
LEALMAN	\$1,251,801	\$1,523,140	21.68%
LEALMAN FOR TIERRA VERDE*	\$319,061	\$371,189	16.34%
MADEIRA BEACH	\$340,835	\$324,856	-4.69%
OLDSMAR	\$384,248	\$403,043	4.89%
PALM HARBOR	\$1,826,786	\$1,906,894	4.39%
PINELLAS PARK	\$2,845,271	\$2,919,696	2.62%
PINELLAS SUNCOAST	\$588,966	\$613,664	4.19%
SAFETY HARBOR	\$845,918	\$820,811	-2.97%
SEMINOLE	\$2,058,591	\$2,058,779	0.01%
SOUTH PASADENA	\$712,569	\$719,484	0.97%
ST. PETE BEACH	\$1,216,072	\$1,445,699	18.88%
ST. PETERSBURG	\$12,414,148	\$13,036,746	5.02%
TARPON SPRINGS	\$884,094	\$982,537	11.13%
TREASURE ISLAND	\$395,837	\$409,210	3.38%
TOTAL	\$38,164,463	\$40,253,301	5.47%

EMS funding for 2012-13 fiscal year

The 18 cities and fire districts have submitted their preliminary budget requests to Pinellas County for emergency medical services for the 2013-14 fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. These are preliminary and will likely change before the overall EMS budget is finalized.

* Belleair Bluffs contracts with Largo for fire and EMS and Tierra Verde contracts with Lealman for fire and EMS.

Sources: Pinellas County EMS, cities of St. Petersburg, Pinellas Park, Madeira Beach

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