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Cutting Medics Will Impact People in Fla. County

Christopher O'Donnell

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If the proposal passes, the number of medics on duty overnight will be reduced.

Feb. 05--CLEARWATER -- Pinellas County commissioners seem set to push ahead with controversial funding cuts to the county's emergency medical system despite warnings from fire chiefs it will reduce 911 response times and affect their ability to respond to major emergencies such as storms.

At a heated meeting Tuesday, a majority of commissioners said they support cutting \$2.3 million from the \$40.4 million the county pays every year to Pinellas' 18 fire districts to serve as medical first responders.

The county is proposing that fire departments reduce the number of paramedics on duty overnight when the volume of 911 calls drops, although it would be up to fire departments to decide how they implement any changes.

Five districts -- St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Lealman and Pinellas Park -- that county officials say have extra capacity would have their funding reduced during the next three years. Additionally, annual funding increases to cover rising fuel costs, pay raises and other expenses would be suspended for three years. Beginning in 2018, funding would be tied to a cost index.

The plan would mean fewer fire vehicles in use at night, which could lead to fire trucks being on a medical call when a fire breaks out or vice versa, Lealman district chief Jim Millican said.

"Where are we going to go with that?" he said. "Are we going to wait for Tampa to show (up) to take care of your heart attacks?"

But commissioners hope the plan can end a decades long battle between the county and cities over EMS costs. The proposal is estimated to save the county up to \$18 million in the first three years and as much as \$60 million over 10 years. It would enable commissioners to freeze EMS property taxes during the next four years, officials said.

The plan would result in a seven-second increase in the county's 4 1/2 minute average response time, said Bruce Moeller, Pinellas County executive director of safety and emergency services.

The county's standard is to respond to 90 percent of calls within 7 1/2 minutes.

Without the cuts, officials estimate EMS will run at a deficit, forcing the county to use up EMS reserves and raise taxes.

Fourteen of Pinellas' 18 fire districts are city fire departments and run by city commissions. Eight city managers have indicated they will recommend commissions approve the plan, County Administrator Bob LaSala said.

But of the five districts facing funding cuts, only Clearwater's city manager has indicated support. St. Petersburg, which would lose \$1 million over three years, is working on a response, city staff said Tuesday. The city previously has threatened legal action if the county made changes that would lower response times.

"This is something we do have to address," Pinellas County Commission Chairwoman Karen Seel said. "I don't think it will be totally popular with everyone, but it is what it is."

The meeting produced a few testy exchanges, with LaSala reminding commissioners that the fire chiefs at the meeting are not elected nor "decision-makers."

"I personally find it moderately offensive we continue to be diminished and belittled in front of this body," Pinellas Suncoast Fire & Rescue District Chief Robert Polk responded.

Polk also warned that 33 percent of fatal fires occur when people are asleep. He said the funding freeze will hurt fire districts that have agreed to annual salary raises for firefighters through collective bargaining agreements.

Commissioners will have until later in the year to make a final decision on the plan as the county plans its 2015 budget.

"We've been talking about this for a long time," Commissioner Ken Welch said. "Hopefully we are bringing this in for a landing."

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