

St. Pete, Pinellas resolve EMS funding dispute

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The dispute had stemmed from Pinellas County's wish to reduce the \$40.4 million it pays annually to its 18 fire districts to serve as medical first responders.

ST. PETERSBURG — A decades-long dispute between the city and the county over funding of emergency medical services is over for now.

The City Council on Thursday unanimously approved a new three-year funding deal that city leaders say means no increase in the time it takes first responders to reach an emergency scene, but also satisfies the county's wish to rein in costs of the EMS system.

Under the proposal, the county will reduce EMS funding to the city by roughly \$709,000 for the 2015 financial year, a cut of 5.7 percent from its \$12.5 million annual funding. But the city will receive an extra \$997,000 in 2016 and an increase of \$784,000 in 2017.

Previously, the county had proposed cutting \$1 million over three years based on a study that recommends fewer paramedics on duty overnight when the volume of 911 calls drops.

That led city leaders to threaten legal action, saying it would lengthen response times and put residents in danger.

The county will benefit from the agreement through long-term savings by linking future funding increases to a cost-of-living index, said Bruce Moeller, Pinellas County interim chief of staff.

The new contract also must be approved by county commissioners, likely at their next meeting June 24.

Agreement on the new contract is sharp departure from recent contentious negotiations as county commissioners had pushed former County Administrator Bob LaSala to lower costs.

Commissioners then fired LaSala in April after a majority of them said his caustic leadership style led the county into too many disputes.

Major points of disagreement were hammered out at a meeting Sunday attended by Mayor Rick Kriseman, St. Petersburg Fire Chief James Large and Interim County Administrator Mark Woodard, among others.

City Attorney John Wolfe said the change in leadership brought with it a new approach from the county.

“They have shown in the negotiations a definite change in attitudes,” Wolfe said. “There’s been more cooperation; they’ve listened to us for the first time in years.”

The dispute stemmed from the county’s wish to reduce the \$40.4 million it pays annually to Pinellas’ 18 fire districts to serve as medical first responders. Commissioners warned that the service paid for through a separate property tax was likely to go into the red if costs were not contained.

Its controversial proposal was based on a \$300,000 study by Fitch and Associates that paramedics who serve as first responders on medical 911 calls switch from 24-hour to 14-hour shifts. That would have also meant funding cuts for Clearwater, Largo, Lealman and Pinellas Park and frozen funding for all districts for three years.

County leaders met with 17 of the county’s 18 fire departments Wednesday and are making progress on a new approach, Moeller said.

“We’re going to model it after the agreement with St. Petersburg,” he said. “We’re translating that now for other cities.”

In other action:

The council approved using \$1.4 million of Weeki Wachee funds to redevelop Twin Brooks Golf Course in south St. Petersburg. The par-3 course will be transformed into a more challenging nine-hole course with three practice holes, golf-cart lanes, putting green and driving range.

Mayor Rick Kriseman signed the Mayors for the Freedom to Marry pledge to show the city’s support for same-sex couples. Kriseman also announced a rainbow flag will fly over City Hall to mark the three-day St. Pete Pride Festival, which begins June 27.

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