



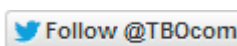
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# Mayor Kriseman won't fight Pinellas EMS cuts

BY CHRISTOPHER O'DONNELL

Tribune staff

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**ST. PETERSBURG** — Mayor Rick Kriseman said the city should not challenge Pinellas County's plan to lower EMS funding even though St. Petersburg is bearing the brunt of the cuts.

Pinellas County officials want to cut \$2.3 million from the \$40.4 million it pays each year to 18 fire districts to act as medical first responders. Fire chiefs are warning the cuts could result in longer response times to 911 calls, a claim county officials refute.

St. Petersburg would lose roughly \$1 million per year, equivalent to 47 percent of the total cuts proposed. The city handles about 30 percent of the county's 911 medical calls.

The cuts are based on a study that recommends fewer paramedics on duty overnight when the volume of 911 calls drops, although it would be up to cities and fire districts to decide overnight staffing levels.

In the past, St. Petersburg has threatened legal action when the county proposed changes that would lower response times. But in a letter to Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala sent Wednesday, Kriseman said he will recommend the city council accept the plan, but he stressed that the city will take steps to maintain residents' safety.

"We believe that a loss of either paramedics and/or rescue units would result in a change in the level of service to the citizens of St. Petersburg," Kriseman wrote.

The county and cities have fought a decades-long battle over EMS costs. Without cuts, county officials warn that EMS will run at a deficit and force the county to use up reserves and raise taxes.

EMS funding for Clearwater, Largo, Lealman and Pinellas Park also would be cut, although Palm Harbor, Seminole and Tarpon Springs would get modest increases. Additionally, annual funding increases would be suspended for three years. Beginning in 2018, those increases would be based on a cost-of-living index. That would save the county up to \$60 million over 10 years.

City managers and fire chiefs in 10 districts have said they will recommend the plan to city councils and fire control boards.

LaSala said Kriseman's decision to back the plan was a good first step.

"It's very encouraging and we appreciate the spirit of cooperation and collaboration," he said.

City council would have to approve changes to the city's inter-local agreement with the county.

Council member Charlie Gerdes said he is concerned 911 response times may be affected and wants reassurance from the city's 911 responders before backing any change.

County officials say the plan would result in only a seven-second increase in the county's 4½-minute average response time. The county's standard is to respond to 90 percent of calls within 7½ minutes.

"I want to hear from our chief in charge of EMS and our fire chief," said Gerdes. "I sympathize with wanting to be financially responsible, but I want to make sure our citizens get the service they expect."

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