

Planned EMS cuts to proceed despite administrator's firing

Largo lawmakers are trying to force the county to negotiate proposed emergency services budget cuts.

Andre Senior, WTSP 11:45 p.m. EDT April 15, 2014

Largo, Florida – On the same day that Pinellas County commissioners voted to dismiss administrator Bob LaSala, City of Largo lawmakers agreed on a resolution to force the county to the bargaining table.

"It's an unfortunate situation... little issues and problems built up over time to where a majority of the commission felt it was time for him to go," said Pinellas Commissioner Charlie Justice.

LaSala was charged with slashing the county's EMS budget of \$116 million by cutting the amount it is required by the State of Florida to pay local governments, such as Largo, to operate the service.

Over the course of two years, Largo would lose \$2 million and \$9 million over ten years from its EMS budget.

Fire officials say losing that kind of money would mean that staff and equipment reductions would be inevitable.

"The less people that are available to more people we have to draw from automatic aid, the longer it takes people to get to there from other cities to provide that aide to us," said fire Chief Shelby Willis.

Largo commissioners are against any cuts to emergency services, which would result in longer response times and staff reduction at certain locations during the overnight hours.

They say county officials, led by LaSala, have refused to negotiate and views LaSala's ouster with renewed hope.

"We hope this is an opportunity to take a breath, pause and regroup and actually try to move forward to negotiating a new contract," said Willis.

But LaSala's firing does not stall the proposed funding cuts to cities like Largo, St. Petersburg, Pinellas Park, Clearwater and Lealman.

"The only solution others have come up with is simply raise more taxes and we're trying to find a way to balance our budget and do it long term without having to raise taxes every single year," said Commissioner Justice.

Largo commissioners said that if they county refused to negotiate on the budget cuts then they will be forced to take them to court.