

Battle over Pinellas EMS funding comes to a close

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ST. PETERSBURG (FOX 13) -

A high-dollar dispute that has darkened Pinellas political harmonies since 2008 may soon come to an end.

"We'll be meeting tomorrow Wednesday with all of the [cities](#), all of the providers, all 18," interim county administrator Mark Woodard told FOX 13 News, referring to new proposed contracts with 18 separate fire departments.

They dispatch the first responders to emergency medical calls, with paramedics and advanced life support units usually arriving in under five minutes.

Under a unique state law, the county imposes a special property tax to pay for that first response and for a private ambulance company that transports patients.

In 2008, the Great Recession plundered property values and plunged the system into the red. The tax had to be raised while the county pursued [consultants'](#) recommendations to cut costs by increasing response times.

"Some of the earlier iterations were focused on operationalizing the system," Woodard admitted. "Many of our partners objected to that because they didn't want the county -- or anyone -- to dictate to them how many units they had to have on the street, how they went about their [business](#)."

Two weeks ago, Woodard and support staff met with St. Petersburg's mayor and support staff.

"We pulled up the agreement on a screen, my assistant was there to type in, and we went page by page and worked through any issues that we had to come to an agreement," Kriseman said.

While Woodard got the [financial](#) stability the county needed, the city got what it wanted, including "Level of service is not going to change at all for our citizens," Kriseman said.

Lealman Fire and Rescue Chief Rick Graham is president of the Pinellas Fire Chiefs Association. He called the county's decision to stay out of operations "...a good place to start."

He had not yet seen the proposed contract with his agency and 16 others.

"We need to make sure first of all that everyone's getting the same contract," Graham cautioned, "...and then we're going to make sure that the numbers work for each one of the providers."

The bad blood born of the EMS controversy sometimes extended into other city-relations. Since 2009, the EMS system has relied on year-to-year agreements.

"We're also seeking a three to a five year agreement," Woodard said. "I think if we're successful in securing an agreement of that duration with our partners, it also gives us an opportunity to build some additional trust amongst the parties."