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Published on TBNWeekly.com - May 10, 2011

Commissioners tackle EMS funding

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Article published on Tuesday, May 10, 2011

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CLEARWATER - Pinellas County Commissioners continue to search for ways to fund a countywide EMS system in tough economic times.

Mic Gunderson, one of the principals with Integral Performance Solutions, a consulting firm hired to study the county's EMS system, provided an update to a report first released in January during the commissions May 3 work session.

County Administrator Bob LaSala prefaced Gunderson's presentation by explaining that his staff had purposely taken a "hands off approach" while IPS prepared its first report so that the findings would be that of the experts - the hired consultant.

"In February and March my staff took a very deliberate approach to reviewing the findings in conjunction with the consultant Mic Gunderson and his statistical expert Mr. (Todd) Hatley," LaSala said. "We checked, verified and updated the numbers as well as confirmed various assumptions and facts included in the preliminary report. The result is before you today."

Basic recommendations made in January remain the same, LaSala said.

"IPS has made suggestions that both operate to protect the level of service for every citizen in Pinellas County and create the fairest most equitable manner of funding this system now and in the future," LaSala said.

Many numbers and statistics changed under the staff's review, he said. Several media reports after the January report was released pointed to discrepancies in the numbers. Some commissioners also questioned IPS's statistics on existing services.

LaSala admitted some of the numbers had required updating, but none of the changes affected the basic recommendations on how to continue providing the same level of service with less

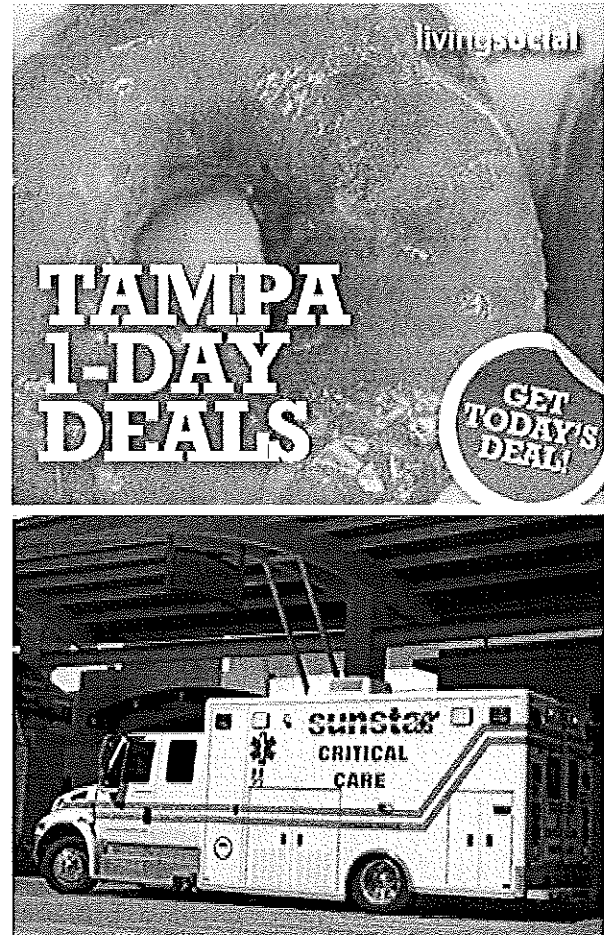


Photo courtesy PINELLAS COUNTY COMMUNICATIONS

Sunstar Ambulance provides emergency and non-emergency transport service for Pinellas County residents.

revenue.

Pinellas County has been making up the difference in revenue versus funding needs using EMS reserves. Commissioners toyed with the idea of raising EMS millage rates for the current year, but in the end chose to make up the \$5 million deficit by using reserves. Staff estimates a deficit of \$13.5 million by the end of the year. Continuing to make up the difference using reserves will deplete EMS reserves by mid-year 2012, LaSala said.

LaSala said IPS was asked to look for a way to continue delivery of what he calls a platinum level of service, first responders on scene within 7.5 minutes 90 percent of the time, while improving the fairness of funding the system, and control and manage costs.

He said individual fire departments had implemented cost savings measures and county staff had cut and trimmed budgets, but costs still exceed projected revenues.

Commissioners will take up the matter of funding alternatives during a review of the EMS budget at a May 26 work session. Visit www.pinellascounty.org for information about the meeting time, which has not yet been set.

IPS made one new recommendation at the May 3 meeting.

"The consultant has suggested and I agree that further review from an operational perspective should be done on the deployment of units throughout the county," LaSala said.

He said a request for proposal would be prepared to seek a consultant to undertake that review.

IPS recommends that the county pay for 72 full time positions split between 19 providers of countywide first responder services. Currently the county pays for 62 positions. IPS initially recommended funding 74 positions.

Each position should be funded to pay for 3.6 full time employees, which allows for sick time, vacation leave and some of the supervisory cost, Gunderson said. Projected cost would be almost \$23 million as compared to \$38 million the county currently budgets for first responders.

IPS also recommends that all 72 positions be paid the same to create "fairness" that is not in play with the current funding system, he said. The county currently funds paramedic positions at cost, which is dictated by the different fire departments or fire districts.

Gunderson presented charts showing the cost differences for the 19 service providers. Annual medical first responder funding per capita showed a 554 percent difference between providers. Funding per response showed a 203 percent spread. Funding per unit showed a 192 percent difference, and looking at total average compensation, including salaries and benefits, revealed a 66 percent difference.

"Fairness is lacking in levels of MFR (medical first response) funding between departments," he

said. "This needs to be resolved with changes in the method of calculation for MFR compensation."

He reviewed a number of funding options. The first is maintaining the status quo, which will result in the depletion of reserve funds by fiscal year 2012-2013.

"Not a place you want to be," he said.

The second option is to increase EMS ad valorem tax, which does not resolve funding inequities or control the budget increases.

Another alternative is to eliminate medical first response and use ambulance service, which would reduce the level of service to 10 minutes response time 90 percent of the time. He said eliminating first responder service would have a "severe impact" on people having a cardiac arrest or airway obstruction or other life and death situations. He said while critical emergencies made up only a small percentage of calls in the county, any reduction in service would affect those "most vulnerable."

Another option would be to privatize first responder service, which Gunderson said would put the county and its fire departments and fire districts at a financial disadvantage.

IPS looked at the suggestion that fire departments take over transports. Currently, first responders do not transport unless there is a special need. The county contracts with a private firm to provide Sunstar Ambulance transport. Currently, Sunstar pays for itself and makes money for the system. Gunderson said fire department transport would not pay for itself and would create an additional problem of having units unavailable in the advent of a fire emergency. Having a private ambulance service do transports allows fire personnel to return to the job as soon as possible.

Gunderson also talked about a new concept being used in the United States and other countries that adds options to the choices first responders have in treating patients. Currently, there are only two choices - transport to the hospital or leave them at home.

Gunderson used an earache as an example. He said now, a first responder could only leave the person at home or have the patient transported to the hospital. In a paramedical community system, additional choices, such as taking them to an urgent care or calling their primary doctor, would be available.

Commissioner Susan Latvala called the concept "interesting," but expressed concern that everyone would start calling 911 to take care of the medical needs.

IPS's study looked at ways to reduce the number of first responder calls. LaSala said continued resistance by some municipalities and fire departments was delaying the full implementation of the priority 911 system that prevents sending a first responder vehicle and an ambulance to calls that are deemed non-emergencies.

LaSala said the board could leave things unchanged for another year and use reserves to make up the deficit to give fire departments more time to make budget adjustments, but he made it clear that unless the economy miraculously improved, the commission could be forced to supplement EMS costs with general fund revenue.

He said proposed changes would require belt tightening in each fire department, but advocated moving to a fairer funding approach and split of property tax revenue.

"But we can't balance the budget on the backs of fire districts and municipalities," he said.

LaSala deferred making staff recommendations until a recently received anonymous report could be reviewed. He said normally he would dismiss an anonymous report, but this one seemed to have been written by "someone in the business" with figures very close to those provided by the consultant. He said staff should be able to go over the report in the next two weeks, before the May 26 work session.

Latvala asked that the author of the report come forward so staff could ask them questions, if necessary.

"I don't want them coming up later and saying we didn't listen," she said.

LaSala said staff would continue to reach out to stakeholders and interested parties in the coming weeks. He said it was important to get input and ideas from everyone.

"This is one of the most difficult decisions we'll have to make in the near future," Latvala said.

"There are no easy decisions."

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