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EMS situation still murky

Bankruptcy no longer looms, but a big cost disparity frustrates all involved.

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Pinellas County Administrator Bob LaSala's warnings were dire: Taxes have to go up and the funding formula must be changed or the county's emergency medical services system would be bankrupt by 2013.

So county commissioners increased EMS property taxes by 46 percent.

But they have yet to adopt LaSala's proposal to change the funding formula for the 18 fire departments that provide EMS service.

Does that mean the system is still facing bankruptcy in 2013?

Probably not. County figures show that, at the beginning of the next fiscal year, Pinellas will have about \$19.4 million in reserves. Not healthy, per-

haps, but not bankrupt.

County estimates also indicate that, because of the influx of funds from the tax hike, the EMS fund would not run out of money until 2016, according to documents that officials gave to St. Petersburg in October.

But LaSala says that estimate is out of date and is too optimistic. Revised estimates, he says, will indicate that

the EMS fund will run out of money in 2014. And even if the account had money until 2016, LaSala said he will not recommend the commission live off savings as it has done in the past.

"That's got to stop," he said.

The changing numbers make it hard to grasp just how desperate the financial situation is. And they're not the

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Administrator Bob LaSala says living off savings has "got to stop."

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EMS situation murky

only numbers that seem to slide in all directions as the debate over the future of the EMS system goes on.

Take a proposal by firefighters Scott Sanford and Jim Millican. They say their plan of fire transport could save the county about \$20 million a year.

County officials say that's not so. The Sanford-Millican plan, they say, will actually cost the county millions.

"The first time (they analyzed it), it came back, they said, 'Great plan, looks good, you missed (\$2.7) million,'" Sanford said.

They amended their plan and tried again. This time, Sanford said, the evaluation came back as costing the county \$12.5 million. Then the county's estimate of the cost of their plan rose to about \$19.5 million. The county's latest estimate is that the Sanford-Millican plan will cost taxpayers \$25 million.

"It keeps growing," Sanford said.

The latest estimate leaves a \$45 million gap in what Sanford and Millican say their plan will cost and what county officials say it will cost.

That spread gives many pause.

East Lake Fire Commissioner Paul Ferreri, an accountant, says he has studied LaSala's and the Sanford-Millican plans and is unable to decipher the truth of the numbers in either proposal. Ferreri, who says he supports firefighter transport of patients to hospitals, believes some numbers in LaSala's plan may be "skewed too high" and some in the Sanford-Millican plan may be "skewed too low."

"I don't believe the numbers are vague because of any indi-

vidual agenda," Ferreri said. But the discrepancies need to be resolved, he said, so an informed decision can be made about the best choice for Pinellas EMS service.

Ferreri is not alone in wondering about the discrepancies. At a public hearing last week, members of the Pinellas legislative delegation said they had a hard time reconciling such widely divergent estimates.

"It's too big a difference," state Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, said. "Somebody's got to be way off."

The delegation recommended the county and Sanford-Millican supporters form a committee to find an accountant to study the proposals and the current system to come up with accurate cost estimates by July 1.

That's a solution Ferreri endorses. There are accountants, he said, who specialize in municipal fire services, breaking down the plans into individual components so they can be evaluated.

Those who, like St. Petersburg, support a delay in the implementation of LaSala's plan say there's time to do evaluations now that bankruptcy is not looming.

"When trying to find solutions that involve a lot of different entities and have a complex system, more time means it is more likely you'll come to a solution that will be more palatable to all parties," said Tish Elston, St. Petersburg city administrator. "That's kind of what we're pushing for."

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