

**Pinellas Assembly – Fire/EMS Task Force
Meeting minutes – September 22, 2003, 3 pm
Largo Training Center**

Present: Ed Hooper/ chair, Joe Calio, Sally Foote, Sally Israel, Jerry Knight, Kathleen Litton, Tim Schuler

Staff: Gay Lancaster, (county representative), Jim Callahan (city representative), Cindy Goodson (scribe)

Others: Karen Seel (Chair BCC), Dwaine Booth, Mike Cooksey, Steve Fravel, Janice Metzger, Chris Staubus (Utilities), Dave Daiker (PC Council of Firefighters), Bob Siler (AMR), Kevin Bowman (TS), James Angle (PH), Caroll Williams (LA), Bill Naylor (SP), Dan Graves (SE), Rowland Herald (CL), Ken Cramer (PP), Michael Handoga.

Mr. Hooper called the meeting to order, noting this was the first meeting since August 25.

The minutes of August 25 were approved unanimously.

Chair noted at the last meeting (8/25), the committee tentatively agreed on two issues and deferred one for additional discussion (implementation of a fire fee for non-residential, non-governmental tax exempt properties):

- To attain an ISO rating of 3 or better countywide. Passed unanimously in concept.
- Recognize and encourage the current level of joint purchase of materials and equipment. Recommend joint purchase of workers compensation and other forms of insurance, if a cost-benefit results.” Passed unanimously in concept.

The Chair reported he had attended the Pinellas Assembly Mid-term Meeting on September 3. In attendance was Karen Seel of the BCC, Co-Chair, Mayor DiDonato, various city mayors and the seven task-force representatives. At that time, interim reports were given by the various task force representatives of their work progress to date and an overview of the next steps. Based on the reports given, it appears the fire/EMS task force is perhaps ahead of the curve somewhat in the information gathering stage. It was noted that there are still very tough issues to deal with when reaching the committee's final recommendations.

The chair indicated he had met with the City and County representatives on Friday, September 19, to outline the committee's future agenda to ensure completion by the target month of January. An agenda was distributed separating the task force mandate down into four major components:

- A. Savings:
 - Consolidation and/or regionalization
 - Joint purchasing of insurance and other commodities
- B. Service improvement:

ISO Rating
Hydrants and infrastructure

- C. Equitable assignment of costs:
 - Fees
 - Tax equity
 - Technical team support
- D. EMS Transport

This was done in an attempt to organize the discussion points in the form of a work plan.

There was discussion of the fire hydrant issue. The county representative indicated Pinellas County, as the Fire Authority, has the right to establish minimum standards for fire hydrant distances. County staff are currently considering proposing a minimum standard (500') for the placement of hydrants countywide. Generally, Pinellas County is pretty well served, but there are some inequities and problem areas. These areas of concern are partly due to older infrastructure with inadequate water mains that are too small to sufficiently support fire hydrants. These problem areas affect both the County and cities' water suppliers. County 9-1-1 Emergency Communications is in the process of validating the mapping of all hydrants to ensure appropriate plotting. As a result of the Lealman incident, it was discovered not all of the hydrant mapping was as accurate as desired. It was noted, the County has purchased 41 hydrants that will be installed by the City of St. Petersburg in the Lealman area. Next, the county will focus on unincorporated areas of concern to include South Pasadena, Gandy and Bay Pines.

Committee member Foote distributed a handout for discussion. This handout included the charge from the Pinellas Assembly Policy Statement and an example "overarching goal" to be accomplished. There was lengthy discussion on the handout and the desirability of articulating the task force's charge in the form of goals rather than by general categories. This would allow the task force to formulate its recommendations based upon basic guiding principles and a desired outcome. Establishing the elements of the overarching goals will shape the thinking of the group and establish how the recommendations interrelate and serve as a roadway to accomplish those goals.

There was discussion on how to proceed further in the evaluation process, whether utilizing individual or group focus. It was generally agreed to focus on one topic each meeting using a group approach, then move to the next topic, time permitting.

The County indicated they had attempted to develop a model for discussion of fees per discussion last meeting, but was unable to do so, due to the lack of detailed data. In developing a recommendation in this area, it may be necessary to suggest an expert be engaged to provide an assessment. GSG Consultants has performed this analysis for other cities in the past. If the committee feels strongly that tax-exempt entities should pay for fire protection services, the recommendation should be posed and it will be up to the political bodies to decide whether to implement the recommendation or not. A copy of the Property Appraiser's grand certification denoting property types and total/taxable values was redistributed.

A task force member questioned, how the development codes ensure adequate water supply systems? The county advised that, through current permitting processes, water

supply is considered and addressed. It was noted that construction permits are reviewed by the fire service, with the exception of one- and 2-family residential which is primarily managed through the respective building department. The lack of adequate water supply in some areas is primarily due to aged infrastructure prior to the initiation of stringent building codes (prior to the 1970s). There was a general historical discussion of the progression of water supply improvements throughout Pinellas County. There was also lengthy discussion relative to the development and permitting process and how water supply considerations play into that review. There was also general discussion about fire sprinkler retrofit in high-rises. Legislation was passed last year that allows high-rise (>74 feet) condominiums to opt out of the sprinkler retrofit requirements with a 2/3 vote of the homeowners. It was generally thought that it is unlikely the County could convince the legislature to repeal the statewide legislation, but that there may be methods to implement a localized exception to the code through either legislation, referendum, or through the Pinellas County Construction and Licensing Board (PCCLB), who has authority over local building codes. The committee generally agreed that a recommendation should be included to strongly endorse the establishment of minimum standards for water supply and hydrant placement countywide. The County is to provide draft language for consideration.

The chair acknowledged the presence of BCC Chair Karen Seel. Ms. Seel advised she has been attempting to visit all of the task forces to acknowledge and thank the committee members for their participation and efforts in this very important endeavor.

There was a brief discussion about consolidation versus regionalization. It was the general consensus of the group that additional discussion may be necessary. At this time, it seems there is no particular benefit or driving force for this recommendation. It was stated that regionalization or reduction of the number of fire districts may make sense, but that current fire and EMS service contracts may make it a long-term endeavor. There have been some changes in the make-up, primarily due to annexations, contractual agreements (Tierra Verde, Ft. Desoto, Gandy, High Point) and through the creation of special independent fire districts. It was generally thought that these consolidations could happen naturally over time, and that it is unlikely to occur or be successful through the application of pressure.

There was additional discussion on the topic of fees. The County indicated their attorney was uncertain whether some entities could be charged a fee based on their current tax-free status, i.e., schools, hospitals, etc.). St. Petersburg indicated they had previously studied the fee-based structure, but had opted not to go forward with the implementation. A handout was provided that outlined St. Petersburg's proposed assessment structure that was completed as a component of this fee study. It was noted that many of the assessments were not insurmountable, but that there were some large users of fire protection resources that would have been required to pay a significant amount if the fee system would have been implemented. As proposed, this fee structure has been held up in court, but requires all entities to be assessed. If the taxing agency exempts any property group, any lost revenues would have to be absorbed by the taxing agency and cannot be diverted to the other remaining property groups.

It was noted that several governmental agencies have implemented an assessment structure, including Tallahassee, Miami and Sarasota County. It was questioned whether the assessment structure included only taxable properties, or did it include non-

taxable properties as well? This information will be clarified by the city representative and will be brought back to the next meeting. The City representative also indicated Miami will be fine-tuning its fees with the implementation of a proposed negligence user fee for issues such as false alarms and intentional brush fires. The County representative redistributed a copy of the current and proposed fee structure for the Pinellas Suncoast Fire & Rescue District. This proposed increase in fees will be voted upon on September 23 (Note: Referendum passed).

In the areas of fire sprinklers, it was suggested a representative of the county work cooperatively with a couple of area fire chiefs to draft language for the next meeting on this topic.

The current schedule provides for meetings every-other-week through December 15 (10/6, 10/20, 11/3, 11/17, 12/1, 12/15). This would allow four meetings to discuss the four different topics and two weeks for refinement of recommendations to meet the anticipated due date in January. The committee recapped previous discussion items on ISO and water supply, noting they were primarily in category "B," service improvement. Committee member Knight volunteered to fine tune the recommendations previously agreed to (ISO and joint purchasing) for presentation at the next meeting. It was agreed to focus efforts of the 10/6 meeting to finish section B, service improvement, then move to section C, equitable assignment of costs, if time permitted.

A handout was distributed by the City representative, indicating the document was prepared by the cities' technical committee as followup information related to the county position paper and committee member Knight's outline previously discussed. A copy of a letter dated September 8, from Largo City Manager Stanton was distributed, articulating Largo's views on the county's position paper and fire and EMS services generally. There was no discussion on the contents of the letter.

The chair reminded the committee members that any email correspondence among the members should copy Angela of Ms. Lancaster's office for the purpose of maintaining public records.

Next Meeting: October 6, 2003, 3:00 p.m., Largo Training Center