

**Pinellas Assembly – Fire/EMS Task Force
Meeting minutes – October 8, 2003, 3 pm
Largo Training Center**

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

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

Others: Dwaine Booth, Mike Cooksey, Chuck Kearns (PC), Jeff Barnard (Office of Medical Director), Ed Broomes (PC Council of Firefighters), Bob Siler, Dan Stumpfhaoser, Jim Lanier (AMR), Kevin Bowman (TS), James Angle (PH), Carroll Williams (LA), Bill Naylor (S. PA), Dan Graves (SE), Jay Stout (SH), Rowland Herald (CL), John Frank (LE), Louis Betz,

Mr. Hooper called the meeting to order. The minutes of September 22 were approved unanimously.

Two handouts were provided at the beginning of the meeting.

- Memorandum from Dwaine Booth to Gay Lancaster relative to amendments to the Florida Building Code.
- First draft of policy recommendations #1 and #2 formulated by committee member Jerry Knight.

The Chair indicated today's agenda would focus on section B, service improvement. A draft recommendation for an improved ISO rating was provided, the committee is awaiting additional information on the hydrants/infrastructure issue and there was to be further discussion on the sprinkler retrofit issue.

Committee member Knight stated he had heard that the sprinkler retrofit situation may be in further jeopardy at the state level. The Pinellas County Fire Chiefs Association had reported at their October meeting that the retrofit of fire sprinklers in high-rise condominiums has the potential of being overturned entirely by the Legislature next year. The availability of fire sprinkler systems is a major public safety concern, and would still be an appropriate item to support and recommend. Committee member Calio indicated there are 11 high-rise condominium buildings on Sand Key in Clearwater that are not currently sprinklered. It was noted that since the requirement to allow owners of condominiums to vote on whether to install fire sprinklers in their high-rise condo units is contained within State Statute, the statute would have to be modified by the State Legislature to remove the exemption language. It was questioned whether the recommendation should be to pursue legislative action on a state-wide or local county amendment only. It was suggested that if the task force recommended an action, that it would be more practical to leave the recommendation as broad as possible so that it can be implemented as best as possible/feasible. The committee consensus was to accept the draft language for recommendation #3 related to fire sprinkler retrofit:

Recommendation #3: The task force supports the installation of fire sprinkler systems in all residential occupancies. The task force recommends the State Statutes be amended to require full compliance for the retrofit and installation of fire sprinkler systems in each living unit for all high-rise residential buildings greater than 75 feet in height.

Committee member Foote requested revisiting the draft recommendation on ISO. She indicated her perception was that the recommendation was to implement an ISO Class 3 rating as a recommended standard, not simply to study the issue for feasibility. Committee member Knight indicated he'd amend the language to reflect the committee's preference.

The committee discussed hydrants and infrastructure. It was agreed this item involves water supply infrastructure only, i.e., pipes in the ground, water pressure, hydrant sufficiency, water main sizes, distance to hydrants, etc. There was lengthy discussion on this topic. As the Fire Authority, the county is in the process of drafting minimum recommended standards for water supply for fire protection purposes. The chair questioned whether there were any other issues relevant for discussion on hydrants, i.e., testing and flowing, reflective hydrant markers, notification when out-of-service, etc. The county indicated that there are approximately 22,000 hydrants in the county. The City representative indicated one issue for discussion is private hydrants. As a policy, some jurisdictions do not test or flow private hydrants because of liability concerns. It is the individual complex's responsibility to ensure the proper working order of private hydrants. The County representative indicated it appears the community would expect countywide commonalities based upon uniform expectations no matter the jurisdiction. These commonalities could include the assurance of sufficient pressure and water flow for firefighting purposes, minimum distances between hydrants, and that the hydrants are in proper working order. There should be established minimum standards, to include the mechanics for enforcement of those standards. It was noted the fire departments have oversight for commercial development, but does not have jurisdiction in 1-2 family residential developments. It was decided to defer additional discussion until the next meeting on this topic. The County representative indicated she'd provide the current draft of the standard via mail for the task force's consideration prior to the next meeting.

The next topic of discussion was Section C, equitable assignment of costs. The City representative indicated he had made some follow-up contacts with Sarasota and Tallahassee on non-advalorem assessments.

Sarasota charges a non-advalorem assessment for fire protection. The residential rate is \$6.72 per 100 square feet and the commercial rate is \$13.29 per 100 square feet. Church sanctuaries are excluded, however other church facilities such as day cares, offices, residential, etc. are assessed. Governmental properties are excluded from the assessment.

Tallahassee's assessment has been in place 1-2 years. Single family homes are charged \$11.80 and multi-family apartment units are charged \$7.00 monthly. The residential assessments are incorporated into the monthly utility bill. Church sanctuaries are exempt from assessment. Commercial properties are assessed based upon square footage. Governmental buildings are provided fire protection through contracts for services that are individually negotiated. A copy of Tallahassee's Fire Rescue Funding

report will be distributed to the members via email.

It was noted that both the cities of Clearwater and St. Petersburg had previously evaluated the non-advalorem assessment, but both jurisdictions chose not to implement at that time. It was questioned whether there was the political will to implement the assessment countywide. The Lealman Fire District board member, Mr. Frank, indicated Lealman will be deliberating the concept of implementing an assessment in addition to advalorem funding as a means to equally distribute costs among residents. The Lealman Board considered this a more equitable method to generate revenues because everyone would contribute towards the cost of fire protection.

The fire chief of Clearwater gave an overview of their fee study. He indicated that the assessment amount is obtained by an evaluation of workload (call volume), then assigning the budget costs on a pro-rata basis. It was noted this creates a negative impact to some category types because of their high demand for service. If an agency were to exclude or buy down a category type such as nursing homes, those lost revenues would have to come from other general fund sources and could not be reallocated to the other category types.

It was generally agreed that the committee should continue to review this topic. One committee member indicated the concept could perhaps be a minimum uniform fee for those not currently paying, then an advalorem assessment for the remainder. It was noted the fee assessment could only be for fire services at this time. Legislative action would be necessary to combine both fire and EMS assessments together.

The County representative indicated she would inquire with the County Attorney, the legalities of the combination fee/advalorem assessment concept for fire protection services. Other items to be reviewed by the County Attorney include whether there could be a surcharge on mobile home license fees, whether it would be feasible to apply the Pinellas Suncoast Fire District fee structure in lieu of taxes, and whether it is feasible to carve out a class of tax exempt properties for the implementation of an assessment fee.

There was discussion of the uniform countywide tax rate concept. It was stated that it was unlikely a uniform countywide rate could be implemented without full fire service consolidation. A uniform rate for unincorporated areas in the dependent fire districts could be possible. Currently, dependent fire districts are assessed different millages based upon the respective jurisdiction's operating budget and assessed property values. This funding formula is set by legislation for the 13 dependent fire districts. It would most likely take a referendum to change the current funding formula. It was stated that the unincorporated county areas in the dependent districts are shrinking as a result of annexation and the creation of independent fire districts (Lealman, Palm Harbor and East Lake). It was also stated that in the event of a millage redistribution, there would be gainers and losers in that some areas would pay more and others would pay less.

It was noted that some areas have artificially low millage rates for fire protection because of the reliance on automatic aid. There was lengthy discussion relative to efficiency and effectiveness and the use of automatic aid. If the automatic aid agreement was not in place, most jurisdictions would have to add additional personnel and equipment

resources to provide a minimum level of fire protection services. For example, a minimum of 15 firefighters are necessary to perform the essential functions to mitigate a typical fire risk. Many fire departments in the county do not have this minimum level of personnel and equipment available without the use of automatic aid.

A committee member asked if it was possible to separate EMS and fire response so that it is not necessary to respond fire engines to EMS calls. The use of ALS engines is an effective way to serve areas with lower call volumes. Some fire departments utilize fire engines and others utilize separate rescue trucks based upon local demands for service. The City representative stated it is important to remember that it is the same firefighters doing both jobs, fire and EMS. Providing EMS adds very little additional cost to the system because the firefighter resources are there already. (EMS funding is based upon the marginal cost of upgrading firefighters to the paramedic level.)

It was agreed the task force would not resolve the tax equity issue at this meeting and agreed to have further discussion.

Other topics for the next meeting:

Review of draft information on hydrant infrastructure.
Information from County Attorney on legal questions on taxes and fees.
Section C, fees, tax equity and technical team support.

Next Meeting: October 20, 2003, 3:00 p.m., Largo Training Center