

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

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

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

Others: Chuck Kearns, Dwaine Booth, Mike Cooksey (PC), Bob Siler, Jim Lanier, Louis Betz (AMR), John Little (PC Council of FFs), Kevin Bowman (TS), James Angle (PH), Rowland Herald (CL) Jay Stout (SH), Carroll Williams (LA)

Mr. Hooper called the meeting to order. The minutes of October 20 were approved unanimously.

Several handouts were provided at the beginning of the meeting.

- Letter from Fire Chief William Naylor, South Pasadena.
- REVISED, Fire Funding for Single Family Homes - Comparison from Pinellas County Fire/EMS Administration. The previous handout was based upon proposed millages. The revised version is based upon actual FY 04 fire district millages.
- Survey for fire department personnel and fire apparatus resources.
- Email from Committee Member Sally Israel.
- First draft of policy recommendation #3 formulated by committee member Jerry Knight relative to fee assessment.

The committee reviewed the methodology of establishing the dependent fire district millages. And clarified that the fire protection agreements were funded based upon the percentage of property values of the unincorporated area compared to the percentage of the municipal area. For example, if the unincorporated area comprised 20 percent of the total property value, the unincorporated area would be taxed to generate 20 percent of the fire budget. Generally, when unincorporated properties are annexed, the property value is transferred from the unincorporated area to the municipal area. As the city's total property value increases, the unincorporated area's decreases, therefore the unincorporated area is responsible for a smaller percentage of the total budget, i.e., from 20 to 19 percent.

The one exception to this scenario is the High Point Fire District. As properties within High Point are annexed, the remaining unincorporated area continues to pay 100 percent of the costs related to fire protection services.

There was also discussion of the Tierra Verde Fire District. This area is currently assessed 1.32 mills and has a 1.5 mill cap. St. Petersburg has been requesting additional personnel to staff this station with a minimum of four personnel per day, but there is insufficient funds available to cover the additional cost for salaries because of the millage cap. In this case, it would be necessary to raise the fire millage cap through referendum.

There was also discussion of the Belleair/Belleair Bluffs Fire District. This is a unique area of the county. This fiscal year, the Town of Belleair began contracting with the City of Belleair Bluffs for fire protection. This fire contract specifies a certain percentage of the budget that Belleair pays. This percentage is not based upon property valuation.

It was questioned if an assessment fee structure would be a more equitable basis than utilizing property valuation. It was noted that in an assessment fee structure, everyone would pay the same. This would not necessarily cure all, but it would provide the ability to tap into exempt properties that are users but are not currently paying for fire protection services. This structure would help in terms of parity among users of the service.

There was discussion relative to the fee structure. If each taxing entity set their own fee structure, like properties would be paying different fees depending upon their taxing jurisdiction. This proposal would not set consistent fees countywide, but it would be equitable within each taxing district. This also would generate revenues from a new source (tax exempt properties).

The committee briefly discussed Committee Member Israel's email. It was the general consensus to defer further discussion of her comments until Ms. Israel's return.

It was questioned, what was the status of the County water plan? The committee had previously received the 5th draft of the water supply recommendation. The draft is at County Utilities for review and comment. Once completed, it would be taken to the County Commission for consideration. It was noted that the draft policy seems very strong and that it was heading in a good direction.

The fire department personnel and equipment survey was reviewed. It was noted that this information changes periodically based upon local needs. Several of the fire chiefs present provided updated information on the survey. These included Clearwater, Safety Harbor, Tarpon Springs and Palm Harbor.

A committee member questioned what was the total budget for the fire departments. Previous information provided noted that the total was approximately \$111 million for the fire departments and County fire administration.

The Committee reviewed the first draft of recommendation #3. The goal would be to establish and implement a fee schedule for fire protection countywide, providing for an exemption for governmental properties. It was suggested that the County could take a leadership role for the dependent districts and that the cities would be recommended to transition to a fee assessment process afterwards on a case-by-case basis. The County representative indicated if the county were to implement an assessment fee for all dependent fire districts, there could be some issues in determining how the fee should be allocated and paid. Currently, each dependent fire district pays a specified percentage amount of the city's fire department's budget based upon property value. Would it be appropriate to establish the amount due based upon property valuation and then assess those same properties based on some other criteria?

There was additional discussion about the assessment fee process, including what would happen if insufficient funding was collected, how would you determine the calculation and set the fees, and would the taxing authority be able to increase the assessment fee or would it have to go to the voters through a referendum each time.

One of the fire chiefs indicated the discussion on assessment fees for the unincorporated areas may not be viable in the long-term. It was indicated that through annexations and creation of independent fire districts, the dependent fire districts are shrinking. It was restated that the primary reason the committee is leaning towards fire assessments is to ensure that all that use the service pay for the service. Utilizing an estimate of 3 mills, the \$14 billion in tax exempt properties could generate an approximate \$42 million in new revenues. These revenues could be used to improve services (to reach an ISO Class 3), or could be used to reduce the financial burden of those that currently pay.

There was lengthy discussion relative to the county utilizing advalorem taxation for their portion of the fire budgets, while municipalities have several different revenue streams in addition to advalorem to generate their portion of the fire budget. By migrating to an assessment fee scenario, individuals in the municipalities may actually pay more because of these franchise fees. It was noted that if the expenses related to the fire department were removed from the general fund portion of the city budget, that a roll-back of the millage rate or franchise fees may be feasible. It was questioned if an incremental approach could be taken by carving out the capital improvement program and charging an assessment fee for that portion. It was indicated a blend of advalorem and assessment fees would be acceptable if they were applied uniformly.

It was noted that the potential of \$42 million of new revenues (by assessing tax-exempt properties) equates to approximately 37 percent of the total fire departments/County fire administration budget of \$111 million. The Chair noted that it was interesting that the two largest cities (Clearwater and St. Petersburg) had come close to implementing assessment fees, but decided to not go that way because of timing or political issues. The Committee consensus was to accept draft recommendation #3 on fire fees, with minor modifications (add that this was a strong recommendation of the committee, adding a clause for enhancing services based upon local standards and ISO, adding a clause for the feasibility of utilizing incremental implementation, and including an escalator clause). Committee member Knight indicated he would redraft Recommendation #3 based on the comments at today's meeting.

The Chair indicated there are three additional meetings scheduled (November 17, December 1, December 15) and asked what were the topics remaining to be discussed? Regionalization/consolidation/merger, formal action of recommendation #3, transport, formulate recommendations on sprinkler retrofit and water hydrants/infrastructure, and specialty team support.

There was a brief discussion about the current automatic aid agreement and the giving and receiving of aid. It was noted that the sharing of resources is lopsided sometimes. Some agencies give more than they get, while the smaller agencies are sharing everything they have. It was asked if it was feasible to recover costs when aid given versus aid received are not balanced. It was indicated the automatic agreement is a very fragile agreement and that it would probably not be desirable to open up the agreement for redefinition.

There was discussion on the sprinkler retrofit recommendation. It was suggested that the recommendation should have a broader focus of maintaining the integrity of the fire prevention code by not allowing the erosion or weakening of the code through legislative action.

There was discussion on the technical team support. It was noted that in addition to the technical rescue teams and the hazardous materials teams, that dive rescue was another specialty area that should be addressed. It was questioned, what constitutes water rescue. It was indicated that just because a department has a boat or some equipment, it does not necessarily mean they have a dive rescue program. It was suggested that a countywide program be defined prior to discussing a funding mechanism for funding what each department has. This program would need standard minimum criteria and define levels of participation before creating a funding process for firefighters in the water.

Next meeting: November 17, 2003, 3:00 p.m., Largo Training Center