Fire, EMS to face significant impacts from House tax proposal

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PUBLISHED - March 06, 2026

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. Data reviewed by Poliverse from the Pinellas County Property Appraiser has revealed that fire rescue services across the county are slated for massive cuts under HJR-203, the Florida House s proposal to remove all non-school property taxes on homesteaded properties.

Passed last month, the bill s impact on the overall Pinellas County budget has been previously reported, but the law attempts to forbid cuts to law enforcement and fire rescue services. Due to the unique taxation structure of fire services in many areas, including special fire districts, such cuts will nevertheless be unavoidable.

 Special fire districts are provided for by Florida Statute to allow for the existence of independent fire rescue services that are not tied to a specific municipality. These districts are funded by a specific property tax line item that is not tied to an area s general fund, especially ring-fencing fire rescue funding and insulating it from changes made to other government revenue streams.

Governed by elected boards, Pinellas has four special fire districts East Lake, Palm Harbor, Pinellas Suncoast covering several beach communities and Lealman.

Because these fire districts are single-issue their sole revenue stream is property taxes and they do no programming outside of fire suppression cuts would be inevitable. East Lake would be the worst hit, with a 67% cut to their budget. Others would lose between 31% and 53% of their total tax revenue. At these levels closure of stations and reduction in services would be unavoidable without a significant tax increase on remaining properties.

East Lake Fire Rescue declined comment.

State Rep. Adam Anderson, whose district includes East Lake and who voted yes on HJR-203, said It s important to remember that this proposal does not mandate cuts to public safety. If voters have an opportunity to approve the amendment, the Legislature will address implementation next session and work with stakeholders to ensure the policy works as intended.

 In the meantime, local governments already have the authority to roll back millage rates today if they want to provide property tax relief.

A number of other municipalities cover fire services with separate property taxes outside their general funds, including Clearwater and Largo. Under HJR-203, any funding source specifically dedicated to fire and EMS would be forced into deep cuts that could not be directly restored from reductions in other areas of government. Clearwater Fire & Rescue would lose 42% of its funding and Largo Fire Rescue would drop 31%. This is notwithstanding the cut to Pinellas County EMS of almost $42mn, or 39% of its budget.

Cuts to fire services in these communities are on top of reductions to general funds in communities across Pinellas. The following revenue impacts would be expected in Pinellas communities beginning Jan. 1:

Clearwater: -$32mn in FY2027 29% drop versus FY2026

Dunedin: -$9mn 45% drop

Gulfport: -$4mn 50% drop

Largo: -$11mn 25% drop

Pinellas Park: -$8mn 23% drop

St. Petersburg: -$89mn 39% drop

South Pasadena: -$1mn 30% drop

 The resolution advanced by the Florida House, which was amended at the last minute from a gradual elimination of non-school property taxes for homesteads by 2037 to an immediate elimination in 2027, represents nothing more than a cost shift one that would leave a $18.3-billion hole across local budgets, according to the state s own estimate, while forcing local lawmakers to choose between gutting critical services, raising taxes and fees to make up for the missing revenue, or acting on a combination of these options, said the non-partisan Florida Policy Institute in a statement.

 It just highlights how ridiculous these proposals are, and how dangerous they would be for cities and counties, agreed State Rep. Lindsay Cross D-St. Petersburg , who opposed HJR-203. It really has been more of a talking point than an actual policy.

 There s still significant impacts that would happen to first responders police and fire if they re holding their budgets at current levels. It would ultimately reduce spending and support for first responders.

St. Petersburg City Councilmember Mike Harting agreed, noting these proposals fall on top of budget pressure St. Petersburg already faced. Every year when we start the budget process we need $22million to meet the basis for employing people, he said, highlighting union contracts that mandate yearly cost-of-living increases for City employees, including first responders.

 You pick the pieces and parts at the street level that are important, because you have folks that support them and rely on them, but they aren t as critical to the system as having police or fire.

Mike Twitty, who has served as Pinellas County Property Appraiser since 2016, confirmed the veracity of the Appraiser s projections but cautioned that the Florida House s proposal was unlikely to be the last word.

 Knowing that a 60% favorable vote by the electorate is necessary and that the Senate has not taken up the House s proposal of choice, it feels as though the Senate s proposal will have a lower fiscal impact to local governments, he noted.

 This will most likely be some form of an increased homestead exemption to check the boxes of providing tax relief to first-time, longtime, and senior homesteaders.

https://stpete.cityverse.life/poliverse/fire-ems-to-face-significant-impacts-from-florida-house-tax-proposal