

AI Summary: Columbia County's EMS Crisis

Columbia County, Florida faces a dangerous breakdown in its emergency medical services. During a June 4 meeting, the County Commission ("The 5") confronted a failing EMS system marked by frequent "Level Zero" events — times when no ambulances are available to answer 911 calls — along with response times below contractual standards and a projected multimillion-dollar shortfall.

The AmeriPro Crisis

EMS Director Lance Hill reported that in May, EMS provider (ambulances) AmeriPro hit only about 70% compliance in urban areas and 67% in rural zones, far short of the required 90%. The shortage forces fire units to hold scenes while patients wait. Hill described how routinely these failures occur:

- "Monday was one of those days that happens about once a week. There were at least 10 or 12 times on Monday that there were calls for service and no ambulances, and we have fire units sitting on scene."

Commissioner Rocky Ford, who recounted personally waiting roughly 30 minutes for an ambulance, doubted that fines (set to begin July 1) would fix anything:

- "What's gonna happen is it's cheaper to pay the fine than meet the time, and they're going to pay the fine."

Grants and Solutions

The Commission voted unanimously to apply for a SAFER grant, which funds EMS personnel over three years at declining federal shares. Commissioner Hollingsworth requested a cost comparison between expanding AmeriPro and the County operating its own ambulances, while Ford urged adding "fail-safes" to any contract, expressing distrust of the contractor.

The Tax Fight

The sharpest debate concerned funding. Options included a Municipal Service Taxing Unit (MSTU), a future half-cent sales tax (generating ~\$7.5 million annually but unavailable until 2028-2029), special taxes, budget cuts, or doing nothing. After Lake City exited the proposed countywide law-enforcement MSTU, commissioners balked at giving city residents a tax break. Several commissioners favored letting voters decide:

- "Bottom line, I want the citizens to make a decision as to whether EMS is important enough to pay more money in taxes."

Moving Forward

A special meeting is scheduled to tackle EMS funding. Chairman Murphy, mindful of the state's property tax overhaul, warned the county should budget as though it will be \$8 million short. The article closes by urging the often-unruly commission to conduct this critical business with discipline and clarity.