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Pinellas County wants control over county projects no matter where they're located

By David DeCamp, Times Staff Writer

It weighs exempting its facilities from regulation by the cities.

Pinellas County officials found out they had to pay \$220,000 more than they wanted for building permits for a new public safety complex in Largo.

Failing to negotiate lower costs, County Administrator Bob LaSala decided to go another route. He wants to pull rank, and not just on fees.

A proposed ordinance would draw on the county charter to exempt county parks, health and welfare facilities, utilities, emergency medical service facilities, courthouses, St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport, roads and public safety buildings from regulations by the 24 cities in Pinellas.

"It's of course a great concern to us," said St. Petersburg assistant city attorney Mark Winn, noting that it could undercut cities' control.

Relations can be rocky between cities and the county, so the proposal has reverberated among local cities. The County Commission started a process Tuesday that will include public hearings before a vote to give Pinellas exclusive control.

The proposal came out of talks between Largo and county officials over the cost of building permits for the county's \$81 million public safety complex planned at the Sheriff's Office in Largo.

Largo couldn't agree to reduce its fees because state law requires governments to be consistent about the fees it charges, said Largo Assistant City Manager Mike Staffopoulos.

The proposed ordinance would mean that instead of following the city's regulations, the county would pay itself for permits, estimated at \$537,000 or about \$220,000 less than what Largo would charge.

County buildings dot the landscape of cities. The county's action could upend a city's ability to enforce height limits and other regulations that frame the texture of a community, Winn said.

"This is the first time I've heard of the county doing this," Staffopoulos said.

The county's charter gives it special powers to control buildings and land. But instead of citing it for this case, LaSala decided to seek a broader exemption. He said the county will be sensitive to cities' needs and concerns.

"It's the obligation of the county to work with its municipal partners, but also exercise its powers and duties," LaSala said.

Spelling out the properties that are exempt in an ordinance makes the decisionmaking uniform, County Attorney Jim

Bennett said. In the past, he said, the county applied its power in certain cases such as the development of Eagle Lake Park.

But news of the county's proposal created angst among various city officials, who said they'll study the commissioners' reactions and get guidance from their elected officials. Six years ago, the county broached a similar, but broader idea and backed off after cities objected.

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