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Car Crash Responses To Remain Fee Free.

Byline: Ellen Gedalius

Jun. 20--TAMPA -- Bowing in part to public pressure, Mayor Pam Iorio killed a plan Tuesday that would have allowed the fire department to charge for responding to motor vehicle accidents.

"I just don't think it's worth it for what we're going to get from it," Iorio said. "And the ill will. The sentiment seemed to be, 'This is what we pay taxes for.'"

For the past few years, Tampa Fire Rescue had been considering a plan to charge for responding to motor vehicle accidents. Last month, responding to threats of budget cuts, Chief Dennis Jones formalized the proposal and wanted to implement it this year.

The department would have charged \$450 to secure an accident scene, \$650 for light extrication, \$1,800 for heavy extrication and \$2,100 for air transport. Victims' insurance policies would have been billed.

The fee would have generated about \$1.7 million for the city. Another proposal, to increase ambulance transport fees, would have generated about \$1 million.

Those fees would have offset a significant portion of the budget cuts to the fire department.

Although the city council appeared to be on board this month, the mayor has scrapped both plans.

Fire Capt. Bill Wade said Tuesday that Jones agreed the timing wasn't right.

"We live in the community," Wade said. "We see the newspapers. We know what people are thinking. And Tampa Fire Rescue is not looking at alienating itself."

After the Tribune published stories on the topic, several people wrote letters to the editor, complaining about the proposal. Many of the letter writers argued that their property tax dollars should pay for such basic services as traffic crash fees. They also feared higher auto insurance rates.

Councilman Tom Scott said it was wise to kill the plan. The property tax proposal passed by the state Legislature last week will have an about \$22 million effect on Tampa's budget. It could have been worse, he said.

Councilmen Charlie Miranda and John Dingfelder also said they supported the retreat from the proposal.

"If they're not keen on the idea, I respect that," Dingfelder said.

Iorio reaffirmed Tuesday that budget cuts to the police and fire departments won't be so severe as to affect public safety.

The fire department probably will lose some administrative positions, but Wade said layoffs were unlikely. Open positions simply won't be filled.

Jones, however, will need to find other ways to save money.

"Now the fire chief is going to have to go back with a sharper pencil and find a couple million dollars," Wade said.

Reporter Ellen Gedalius can be reached at (813) 259-7679 or egedalius@tampatrib.com.

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