

# Metropolitan Planning Organization ignores recommendation for Medicaid patient transport

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MPO's Herb Polson said there should be no lobbying because of a conflict of interest.

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Medicaid patients in Pinellas County still will get to choose who drives them to appointments — at least for the next six months — after a county board decided Wednesday to ignore changes recommended by an advisory committee that Clearwater Yellow Cab officials called "tainted" by a conflict of interest.

The Metropolitan Planning Organization stopped short of agreeing with that assessment of the committee's work. However, the board acknowledged that two committee members with ties to Yellow Cab competitor United Taxi should not have participated in the discussion of who should receive a \$3.6 million contract for Medicaid patient transport.

The advisory committee recommended giving the contract to Greater Pinellas Transportation Management Services, a private dispatch company whose vice president, Nick Cambas, is an investor in United Taxi.

Also, United Taxi general manager Allen Weatherilt is a member of the advisory committee.

Weatherilt recused himself from voting on the issue during an April 19 meeting, as did Doug Towne, another committee member who does contract work for United Taxi, but both men lobbied for GPTMS during the discussion.

MPO board member Herb Polson, a St. Petersburg City Council member, said Weatherilt and Towne's participation in the discussion "cast a cloud" over the committee's recommendation of GPTMS, even though neither voted. Several other board members agreed with Polson.

"Once you declare a conflict of interest, you do not participate in the conversation. There should be no lobbying," Polson said.

David Sadowsky of the County Attorney's Office said Weatherilt and Towne were legally allowed to take part in the April 19 discussion as long they didn't vote.

"I believe, and I said it at the last meeting, and I'll say it now, that we've met the letter of the law," Sadowsky said.

It wasn't just the involvement of Weatherilt and Towne in the bid discussion that irked MPO board members, though.

Yellow Cab, the preferred choice by a majority of Medicaid patients calling for a ride under the current system, offered to perform the services for more than \$1 million less per year than GPTMS.

MPO executive director Brian Smith explained to board members that cost was not part of the process of rating bidders because the Medicaid transport service has a set budget of \$3.6 million in federal funds awarded to Pinellas annually based on a formula. That wasn't good enough for Polson.

"For the life of me, I don't understand why we didn't have a cost factor in the process," Polson said to a smattering of applause from Yellow Cab supporters in the audience who came to the meeting wearing yellow T-shirts that read "Award to Yellow, riders' choice, save \$1,000,000."

GPTMS has served as dispatcher for the Medicaid transport service for roughly 15 years. When Medicaid patients call in for rides, GPTMS dispatchers offer a selection of transport companies, including Yellow Cab and United Taxi. Well over half of the riders choose Yellow Cab.

Changes at the state and federal level, and the fact that the program went in the red last year for the first time, led MPO staff to suggest a new system in which one company takes care of dispatch and chooses the transport company. Smith explained to the board members Wednesday the advantages of this system, like the possibility of shared rides that could save money.

Yellow Cab officials alleged that awarding the bid to GPTMS would lead to more business for United Taxi, a claim that GPTMS officials dismissed.

GPTMS vice president Cambas said after the meeting he didn't want to issue a "knee-jerk reaction" to the MPO board's decision not to award the \$3.6 million job to his company. GPTMS will continue to act as dispatcher, with Yellow Cab an option for Medicaid patients.

"We've been providing this service for many years. We have no problem doing it for another six months," Cambas said.

The MPO board might issue a new request for proposal that could incorporate some of the concerns discussed Wednesday, members said, giving GPTMS and Yellow Cab another chance to vie for the job.