

**CALHOUN COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
WORKSHOP – VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS  
APRIL 17, 2017**

**PRESENT AND ACTING:**

**DANNY RAY WISE, CHAIRMAN  
GENE BAILEY, VICE-CHAIRMAN  
DENNIS JONES  
JERAL HALL**

**SARAH WILLIAMS, CLERK ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT**

The workshop was called to order by Chairman Wise at 7:00 p.m., CT.

Chairman Wise stated the Board has learned there are many things that need to be done for the volunteer fire departments, and the County needs somewhere to start. Chairman Wise stated the Board has called this workshop to stay in better touch with all the fire departments. Chairman Wise stated it has been brought to the Board's attention there are fire engines needed. It is uncertain whether the County can handle buying fire engines at this time, but understood the age of some of these trucks are well beyond their useful life. Chairman Wise stated he is open to any ideas from the volunteer fire departments on ways to fulfil their needs.

Commissioner Bailey stated the County is not in a position at this time to buy a fire engine for all the fire departments. Commissioner Bailey stated most volunteer fire department first responder gear is not up to date or code standards. Commissioner Bailey stated he would like to get first responder gear for all the departments, air packs, and eventually trucks. Commissioner Bailey stated this will take funding and a system, but until these discussions are had together with all the departments a system cannot be formed. Commissioner Bailey stated one idea was to buy a set of bunker gear per year for one volunteer fire department. Commissioner Bailey stated the Board would be looking at the budget and trying to find some way to finance the volunteer fire departments. Commissioner Bailey stated the County appreciates what the volunteer fire fighters do, and want to try to get the volunteer fire departments the tools they need to operate safely. Commissioner Bailey stated he would like to see everyone work together to find a solution for the volunteer fire departments.

Commissioner Jones stated he is in support of trying to get the volunteer fire departments anything they need, because there is no price tag on someone's life that could be saved by the volunteer fire departments. Commissioner Jones stated he is here to help, and will fight for the volunteer fire departments.

Commissioner Hall stated he appreciates everything the volunteer fire departments do for the County, and is willing to do whatever is needed to help the fire departments.

Chairman Wise stated in the last workshop with the volunteer fire departments, the Board was informed many of the departments are deficient in bunker gear and breathing apparatus, and he would like to see the Board purchase at least four (4) or five (5) sets of bunker gear and breathing apparatus for each department that is in need.

One representative from the fire departments stated purchasing bunker gear and breathing apparatus would be a good thing, but would hate for that expense to set back the fire departments from getting much needed funding for better vehicles to get them to fires on time. The representative stated bunker gear is important, but if they cannot get to a person or place without their equipment breaking down it does not matter what kind of equipment is in the truck because they cannot get to the location.

A representative from another fire department stated most departments need new bunker gear and at least one (1) new truck per department. The representative stated most of the bunker gear is out of date and not safe, especially if there was a massive fire. The representative stated in both ways, with bunker gear and vehicles, the volunteer fire departments have a problem. The representative asked if there might be an option of downsizing on the size of a truck to help with the cost.

Micah John Martin with West Side Volunteer Fire Department stated they have found a vehicle that is equipped to handle most any fire or situation they wanted to bring to the Board. Mr. Martin stated the funding behind the truck is the issue. Mr. Martin stated the idea behind borrowing trucks was for all the volunteer department heads to take the idea to the Commissioners and see if this is something they can afford in their budget where it would not take away from the funding already given to the fire departments. Mr. Martin stated this would benefit the volunteer fire departments because they would not have to worry about paying for maintenance on the trucks, because maintenance is included in the lease and new trucks could be obtained every seven (7) years for the same lease price. Mr. Martin stated with the \$7,500 the departments receive they are barely able to afford to maintain their trucks.

Another fire department representative asked if a half-cent fire tax could be implemented to provide some funding for the fire departments. Chairman Wise stated this is an option, but the money raised by this tax would take away from the ad valorem taxes the county receives, which means the money will come out of the constitutional officers' budgets. Chairman Wise stated he personally does not want to keep taxing people since the County is almost at 10 mills now, but the half-cent fire tax is a possibility. Chairman Wise stated petitions would need to be signed and brought to the supervisor of elections to be added to the ballot to be voted on. Chairman Wise stated taxing properties has also been discussed, but he would personally rather not see this option exercised. Another representative stated the these property owners the tax would be placed on are the people they would be going to help if their home or property was on fire, and would personally be willing to pay \$25 per year to fund the fire departments so they would show up if there was ever a fire on their property. There was further discussion about funding. Another representative stated extra fees on property taxes would be much less than the increase on homeowners insurance if a fire department is no longer able to operate and provide fire protection.

There was further discussion about insurance ratings.

Blountstown Fire Chief Ben Hall asked if anyone was aware of the new State Volunteer Fire Systems Grant. Chief Hall stated this grant is about 200,000 this year, and is supposed to increase to 1.15 million next year. Chief Hall stated the grant is only for volunteer fire departments, no career fire departments can apply. Chief Hall stated the volunteer fire departments could apply for the grant on the myfloridacfo.com State Fire Marshall page. Chief Hall stated this is a 100% funded grant, and a department could receive five (5) sets of bunker gear or five (5) sets of air packs per year, if applied for every year. Chief Hall stated this grant is out there and not many volunteer fire departments have applied for it, and it is almost guaranteed for a volunteer fire department to be awarded the grant if bunker gear is needed. Chief Hall stated he would be happy to show anyone how to apply for the grant. Chief Hall stated the Board could also help the volunteer fire departments by matching the 50% for the Federal Forestry Grants, which provides radios, fire hose, and other such items.

Commissioner Bailey stated he would like to have a Board employee at the County level to help the volunteer fire departments with writing grants and finding funding. Commissioner Bailey stated grants are needed, and if five (5) sets of turn out gear could be obtained through a grant each year that would be great. Commissioner Bailey stated he believes the County could find money to match a grant to help get the volunteer fire departments needed equipment. Commissioner Bailey stated the Board wants to help and realizes there is a problem. Commissioner Bailey stated he was unaware of the severity of the need for fire trucks and equipment until the past three (3) months.

Chief Ben Hall stated every volunteer fire department in the County could apply for the Volunteer Fire Systems grant, and it would not take anything away from the other fire departments. A representative from one of the volunteer fire departments stated they are not good at finding and writing grants, and need someone to show them where to find this grant and how to apply. Chief Hall stated he could schedule a meeting with the volunteer fire departments at the fire department in Blountstown and go through the application process with everyone so they know how to apply for the grant.

Ms. Carla Peacock, Calhoun County Property Appraiser, stated she appreciates everything the volunteer fire departments do and realizes help is needed. Ms. Peacock stated property owners are not going to want to pay any more property taxes, and would be willing to give out of her budget to implement the half cent sales tax.

A representative asked if there was any way for there to be an option on the tax form to donate money to the volunteer fire departments when people pay their taxes to start a fund for the volunteer fire departments. Commissioner Bailey stated he did not know if this would be possible, but he would find out if it would be able to be placed on the tax notice. Commissioner Bailey stated the tax notice might be restricted to only property taxes. Commissioner Bailey stated a utility franchise tax has been discussed, which is a fee to utility companies on light poles on county property, but the utility companies would most likely take the bill they have to pay the county and add a fee to everyone's light bill to make up for the amount. There was further discussion about taxing options.

A representative from Mossy Pond VFD stated the fire truck leasing company told them they would not receive any trucks for about 12 months after the lease is signed, and time is somewhat of the essence if this is an avenue the County would like to take. Chief Hall stated the representative is correct; it takes

almost a year to manufacture a fire truck. The representative stated it would also be helpful if all the trucks were identical so every department would know how to work all the vehicles. There was further discussion about fire trucks.

Mr. Martin with West Side VFD stated the Volunteer Fire Systems grant would be beneficial so not all the costs would be put on the County. Chief Hall stated he brought the grant up to the volunteer fire fighters so the funding provided by the grants could be freed up for the County to help in other areas. Chief Hall stated five (5) sets of bunker gear and five (5) air packs for one department would cost the County \$43,000.

A Magnolia VFD representative asked if the County had thought about looking for used fire trucks that could be financed instead of paying \$300,000 up front for new fire trucks. Chairman Wise stated it has been discussed finding a five (5) or six (6) year old truck. The Magnolia VFD representative stated half the \$7,500 budgeted to them must go toward a mortgage payment, which no other fire departments have, so they operate on half of the budgeted amount.

Commissioner Jones stated Chief Hall brought up a good idea with the Volunteer Fire Systems Grant, and he hopes the fire department chiefs will take him up on his offer to show them how to apply for the grant. Commissioner Jones stated this will still be only a temporary fix, and everyone needs to continue to bring ideas on how to increase funding for the volunteer fire departments. Commissioner Jones stated if something is decided on to place on the ballot for citizens to vote on, the volunteer fire departments need to get out in the community and let people know how important they are.

There was further discussion about grants for fire trucks.

A VFD representative stated if the County did find a used fire truck, it probably would not be worth buying because if it were a good truck it would not be on the market. The representative stated the volunteer fire departments need to get the citizens of the County behind the fire departments. The representative stated up north they have what is called a muster, where each fire department brings out a truck to a certain location and explains to the community the need for fire protection to create publicity for the volunteer fire departments. Another VFD representative asked Sheriff Kimbrel how they could get what their fire department has done put in the paper, so people could see how often the volunteer fire departments are utilized, like the Sheriff's log. Sheriff Kimbrel stated the volunteer fire departments could send their report to the paper and ask it be included. Sheriff Kimbrel stated the volunteer fire departments need to sell their program, and show people how important they are. Sheriff Kimbrel stated a good start would be to publish volunteer fire department reports in the paper. Sheriff Kimbrel stated he also likes the idea of a Saturday where everyone got together and brought out a fire truck, where people could bring their kids out, and fire safety tips could be given to generate some interest. There was further discussion about publicity for the fire departments.

Commissioner Bailey asked how often reports are given at the monthly meetings on what is needed at each fire department. Commissioner Bailey asked if there were needs of the fire departments and other reports that could be conveyed back to the Board. Mr. Jody Daniels stated they generally discuss training, fund raisers, and have an occasional guest speaker. Mr. Daniels stated they have been asked to

report to the Board in the past, but after the first time he reported to the Board they postponed the second report and never followed up with him. Mr. Daniels stated this is something that could be done again with the County to let them know what is being done by the fire departments. Commissioner Bailey stated he would like to hear the information presented personally. Mr. Daniels stated he does not mind giving a report to the Board, but will need the other volunteer fire departments to get him their paperwork in a timely manner so he can have the report ready for the Commissioners. Another VFD representative stated if the calls from each department were published in the County record a report could be compiled from the newspaper. There was further discussion about placing reports in the County Record and informing the public of the services the volunteer fire departments provide. Commissioner Jones stated reports of what the volunteer fire departments have done, along with what is needed at the fire departments, should be published in the paper so there is some awareness in the community of what is needed.

Commissioner Bailey stated if the volunteer fire departments would let the Board know if a truck will not run and needs to be fixed, and the Board will do what they can do to get the truck operable again. Commissioner Bailey stated the Board would manage somehow to find a way to get the vehicle fixed.

A VFD representative stated he worked as a fire fighter in Manatee County in the 80s and 90s. The representative stated they started out as the smallest fire department in the county, but eventually became the largest over the course of about 10 years. The representative stated they did many fundraisers and built up community awareness through the fundraisers. The representative stated marketing is very important, and the key is learning from other departments who are being successful and asking how they accomplish what they do. The representative stated the volunteer fire departments should encourage the community and let them know who the volunteer fire departments are.

Mr. Doyle Daniels stated he has been with the Kinard VFD since 1973, and the fire departments worked hand in hand to getting the county where it is today. Mr. Daniels stated money has always been a problem, and always will be a problem. Mr. Daniels stated everyone needs to continue to put their heads together and work as a team, and let go of any jealousy. Mr. Daniels stated they handed out fliers at the Kinard Carnival one year outlining where funding was spent in the fire department and has never had any complaints from anyone. Mr. Daniels stated Kinard VFD was the last department in the county to receive a new truck, and they were the first department in the county. Mr. Daniels stated he has helped Mossy Pond, West Side, Clarksville, and Nettle Ridge, and they all worked together to help each other. Mr. Daniels stated they have been writing through the Forestry 50/50 grant for the past 30 years, and have received many thousands of dollars' worth of equipment through the grant. Mr. Daniels stated he knows where everyone is coming from and knows things are not easy. Mr. Daniels stated for years there was no funding to the fire departments from the County. Mr. Daniels stated every fire departments needs are different, and if the County could find a way to increase their budgets each fire department could get the things they need, and they would not have to ask for these things. Mr. Daniels stated the volunteer fire departments should get out in the community with fliers and show them how much money has been spent that year on fire service, and people in this county will line up to help the fire departments. Mr. Daniels stated there has never been a need in the County that the citizens have not helped with. Mr. Daniels stated Kinard VFD would be happy to help any of the other fire

departments with any grant writing they need help with. Mr. Daniels stated the volunteer fire departments need to go out and get the community behind them, and apply for grants every year.

Chief Hall stated if the volunteer fire departments would come to his station on May 3 at 6:00 he will show everyone the Volunteer Fire Systems grant, and would also go through the forestry grant. Chief Hall stated to Chairman Wise, if the grant can help with turnout gear the volunteer fire departments are going to need help with new fire trucks. Chairman Wise stated the Board would do what they can to help. There was further discussion about fire trucks.

Mr. Martin stated someone should calculate how much money the volunteer fire departments have saved the county through tree removal from roads. Mr. Martin stated the county is saving money by calling the volunteer fire departments instead of sending out the road department, and asked if the money being saved could somehow be dispensed to the volunteer fire departments. Chairman Wise stated the Board could find out how much money is being saved. Commissioner Bailey stated the reports from the volunteer fire departments would be needed to compile the report. Another VFD representative stated for a tree in the road in the middle of the day the volunteer fire department should not be called, because there are road department staff who are working and could remove the tree. The representative stated she has a problem with someone from one of the volunteer fire departments having to leave work at 2:00 in the middle of the day to remove a tree from the highway when there are county employees on the clock who could take care of the matter.

Commissioner Wise stated he likes the idea that was presented with the lease program for the fire trucks. Chairman Wise stated he hopes all the volunteer fire departments will bring their problems to the Board so they can help to find a solution to the problem. Chairman Wise stated the situation should have never gotten to the point it is now, and trying to fix it all at one time is not easy. Chairman Wise stated he is hoping to have another workshop with the volunteer fire departments in the next month or so to continue to receive feedback. Mr. Daniels asked if the Board would be opposed to meeting at one of the countywide meetings again. Chairman Wise stated he thought this would work out fine. Mr. Daniels stated another workshop could be held on June 19 at 6:00 p.m., CT at Nettle Ridge VFD. Mr. Daniels asked if there were anything the Board would like the volunteer fire departments to present to them at that time. Chairman Wise stated hours worked and service calls would be helpful. Chief Hall asked if it would be beneficial for each volunteer fire department to provide the Board with a needs assessment based on a state grant. Chairman Wise responded this would be great. Commissioner Bailey stated matching funding the volunteer fire departments need would also be helpful to the Board in forming a budget.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 8:25 p.m., CT.

  
DANNY RAY WISE, CHAIRMAN

ATTEST:

  
CARLA A. HAND, CLERK