

**AT A FIRE SERVICES WORKSHOP OF THE BOARD OF
COUNTY COMMISSIONERS HELD IN AND FOR
GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA ON MAY 25, 2023 AT 2:00
PM, THE FOLLOWING PROCEEDING WAS HAD, VIZ:**

Present: **Kimblin NeSmith, Chair, District 3**
 Eric Hinson, Vice-Chair, District 1
 Alonzetta Simpkins, District 2
 Brenda Holt, District 4
 Ronterious “Ron” Green, District 5
 Edward J. Dixon, County Administrator
 Clayton Knowles, County Attorney
 Marcella Blocker, Deputy Clerk
 Adriana Quijada, Secretary to the Boards

CALL TO ORDER, INVOCATION, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair NeSmith called the workshop to Order at 2:05 PM, Commissioner Simpkins gave the Invocation and then led in the Pledge of Allegiance to the U. S. Flag.

CITIZENS REQUESTING TO BE HEARD (3-Minute Limit)

The Gadsden County Board of County Commissioners welcomes and encourages public participation at all meetings of the Board. Citizens are free to speak for up to three (3) minutes on non-agenda items. Public comments and participation are also encouraged for items on the agenda. Additionally, if you are unable to attend a meeting in person, comments from the Public can also be submitted via email to CitizensToBeHeard@gadscdencountyfl.gov until noon on the date of the meeting. Comments submitted after the deadline, but prior to the meeting, will be added to the official record, but the County cannot guarantee that Commissioners and staff will have adequate time to review comments prior to the meeting. Citizens are further encouraged to participate via Zoom using the credentials on the County’s website. The Board’s meetings are also broadcast live on the Board’s Facebook page.

Mr. Dixon read aloud the above statement.

GENERAL BUSINESS

1. Fire services Workshop Presentation

Mr. Dixon stated **Kris Hood, Chief of Emergency Medical Services** would make a presentation.

Chief Hood appeared before the Board and listed the emergency response services that were provided by all of the fire departments. There are currently 11 total county departments; six volunteer fire departments in unincorporated areas of the county and five volunteer fire departments in local municipalities. Fire departments located in the unincorporated areas are Greenshade/Dogtown; Mt. Pleasant; Wetumpka; Robertsville; Concord and Sycamore. The fire departments that are in been Isabel of these are Chattahoochee; Greensboro; Gretna; Havana and Midway. There is current funding for each department. He said contracts expire on September 30, 2023 and the City of Quincy would expire on September 30, 2024.

A company called ISO (Insurance Services Office) creates ratings for Fire Departments and their surrounding communities. The ratings calculate how well-equipped Fire Departments are to put out fires in that community. He showed the current ISO score within the County.

Simpkins stepped out at 2:27 pm

Grading Structure

A department that has less than four certified firefighters showing up on an incident is automatically rated a 10. Any area that is greater than 5 miles from a fire station or greater than 1000 feet from a fire hydrant or viable water source is automatically rated a 10.

50 points comes from the quality of the local fire department including staffing levels, training and proximity of the firehouse.

40 points comes from availability of water supply, including the prevalence of fire hydrants and how much water is available for putting out fires.

10 points comes from the quality of the area's emergency Communications System (911).

An extra 5.5 points comes from community outreach, including fire prevention and safety courses.

Any area that is more than five driving miles from a nearest fire station is automatically rated a 10.

Current factors Effecting Fire Departments

- Money and Manpower
- Limited number of certified volunteers
- Training
- Water Sources
- 911 Dispatch
- Station conditions/locations
- Multiple departments potentially working against one another
- Lack of unified command system throughout
- No unity when it comes to equipment and not being interchangeable
- Multiple departments applying for the same grants.

Simpkins returned at 2:30 pm

Gadsden County Emergency Services

- Currently have 24 career Dual certified Fire/EMS full-time and 5 flex personnel (Fire II)
- 24/7 coverage for EMS/fire (depending on EMS calls)
- Provide a better response rate to protect life and structure
- Improve ISO ratings within County operated departments operating under County Fire number
- Expand coverage throughout the county with an increase of career staffing

- Provide an adequate number of certified fire personnel to departments operating under County Fire number.

Immediate Needs

- Add 3 quick response positions (one per shift)
- These positions will need to be filled with a dual certified fire fighter/paramedic

How Will This Help the County

- Experiencing paramedic shortages with three positions currently open and expect 2-3 to leave this summer
- These positions would need to be backfilled with EMT's in the event unable to obtain paramedics
- Staffing E EMT's on an EMS unit will not have the highest level of care possible. With a paramedic on a quick response vehicle this will assist the shift captain with being able to backup BLS units and provide ALS intervention.
- With this position, would be able to always keep someone in the county and be able to respond with fire are pending EMS calls.

Recommended Fire Coverage-Future Plan

- Per ISO standards, must ensure a minimum of four certified personnel respond to a fire call to achieve the best score
- It is recommended to add a total of 19 career staff to GCES to **START** with staffing fire needs
 - 6 EMT/FF
 - 6 PMD/FF
 - 1 Fire Training officer
 - 6 Medical dispatchers for fire and EMS calls
- This initial addition will allow GCES to dedicate four personnel per shift for fire coverage throughout the entire county
- With adding a training officer this will improve training throughout the county as well as add additional fire response during business hours when volunteer coverage might be limited
- This will allow the guaranteed response 24/7 in the event that volunteers are unavailable
- Recommended to do a yearly analysis to evaluate the need for growth within the department (adding personnel with growth)

Benefits for Adding Fire personnel

- Will provide a guaranteed timely response in the event of a fire related call
- Will provide an adequate amount of manpower per ISO standards to respond 24 hours a day seven days a week
- Will be a positive step towards growing a well-established career department
- Dedicated staff will be able to assist with medical calls in the event additional resources are needed

Benefits for Adding a Fire Training Officer

- Will ensure a unified training schedule that stays in compliance with ISO and NFPA standards
- Provide additional fire coverage/response within normal business hours when volunteer coverage might be limited
- Would have an active role with new hires and orientation process to make sure employees are adequately trained to be able to act on the front line
- The person obtaining this position would be the employees point of contact
- This position will need to be filled with a highly trained and state certified firefighter

Benefits for Adding Medical Dispatchers

- Ability to recognize the need for the proper resource response.
- Ability to provide prearrival medical instructions. Example: CPR, bleeding control
- Triage
- Dispatcher solely dedicated for EMS and fire

Cost to Add Paid County Staff for Fire Coverage

<u>Position</u>	<u>Salary</u>	<u>FICA</u>	<u>FRS</u>	<u>Health</u>	<u>Total</u>
EMT/FF	\$15.50	\$3,946.18	\$13,143.60	\$10,832.64	\$81,118.42
PMD/FF	\$17.25	\$4,391.71	\$14,627.56	\$12,056.68	\$90,276.59

Chief Hood stated they now need to integrate.

Recommendations for Improvement

- Put \$25,000 for a training budget for Fire 1 certification. (Would certify about 25 volunteers with Fire 1 certification). For all future budgets
- This current year provide up to \$10,000 for training.
- Provide call incentives for certified volunteers that respond under one County Fire number.
- Bring volunteers and fire departments wishing to join GCES under one County Fire number and County roster.
- Provide unified training for career staff and volunteer staff that operate under GCES.

Benefit for Department Integration with the County

- Increased personnel for one unified County response (one roster)
- Better response rate for volunteers/career staff.
- Improve ISO rating for integrated departments.
- Pay per call incentive volunteers (\$20 per call)
- Offer paid certification
- Unified training system
- Unified command system
- Unified equipment
- Increased grant success

How do We Start Now?

Step 1

- GCES moves dual certified EMS crew to the Robertsville station to potentially help with fire coverage (if not on EMS calls)
- Communicate with other volunteer departments/ community leaders to see who would like to integrate under one county fire number
- Departments that wish to integrate with GCES start training as one unified department
- After the need is recognized, we develop a plan to be able to provide dedicated staffing coverage for the partnering departments. (county staffed departments would need to come under one State Fire Number)
- Continue to grow and develop a unified department with a unified command system

Step 2

- Add additional staffing for a dedicated fire response within county operated departments
- Re-evaluate with all departments to recognize the need for integration including the City of Quincy
- Continue to offer unified training within the county operated department, including volunteers operating under county fire number

Step 3

- Each budget year continue with growth demand in order to establish adequate staffing and equipment to be able to keep ISO rating at the minimum and provide adequate staffing for fire response throughout the county
- Continue to grow and establish a well-respected volunteer/career department
- Identify a continuous funding source
- It is recommended to look into a MSBU to help offset the cost of a growing department

Additional Needs to make it happen

- With an increase in staffing additional sets of Bunker gear will need to be purchased
- New stations
- Renovate existing stations
- Purchase additional fire apparatuses
- Purchase additional fire equipment
- Quick response vehicles
- Provide access to all county buildings and equipment to career staff

How do they offset the cost?

- Potential to perform Fire Code Inspections
 - Members of staff are currently certified inspectors
- Allocate a portion of the gas tax to GCES
 - With guaranteed fire coverage with career staff, ISO ratings will improve thus reducing the cost of Home Insurance premiums for our citizens
 - Life and property will be protected with career/volunteer staff 24/7

How Do We Recruit Career Staff for Shortages?

Recruitment Plan:

- Develop a scholarship program with an application process through the school system that will allow a set number of students to be able to obtain a paid scholarship for EMT and Fire School
- Paid tuition for current employees
- Career Days
- Social media

Pros and Cons for Volunteer Fire Departments:

Pros:

- Good hearted personnel
- Cost effective

Cons:

- No guaranteed response
- A decrease in volunteers
- Increased ISO ratings
- Increased insurance premiums for homeowners
- Not meeting minimum training requirements
- Little to no incentive
- Lack of certified personnel
- Lengthy certification time
- Volunteers have other jobs they are obligated to
- No benefits other than pride
- Lack of funding
- Lack of unified command within county
- Territorial

Pros and Cons for Career Fire Departments:

Pros:

- Guarantee timely response
- 24/7 coverage
- State certified staffing
- Better structure protection
- Life safety
- Better public perception
- Decreased ISO ratings
- Decreased insurance premiums
- Increase for response for tragic events
- Dedicated training
- Rewarding career
- Benefit package
- Better recruitment and retention
- Room for growth

Cons:

- Costly

- Increased staffing requirements
- Increase in equipment requirements

Closing

- It is imperative that we continue to invest in public safety for the citizens and visitors of Gadsden County
- We must continue to replace the antiquated fleet and equipment and address the needs of the community
- Together, with the BOCC, we can achieve our goal of providing fiscally-sound, high quality, comprehensive fire rescue services

Commissioner Simpkins stepped out at 2:53 pm

Commissioner Simpkins returned at 2:54 pm

Commissioner Green suggested to go page by page with any questions there might be.

Ms. Daniels appeared before the board and explained the PIO was having some technical issues with her computer and asked if the board could take a recess. Chair NeSmith asked for a motion for a 5-minute recess.

COMMISSIONER HOLT MADE A MOTION FOR A RECESS AND COMMISSIONER GREEN MADE THE SECOND. THE BOARD VOTED 5-0 BY VOICE VOTE TO APPROVE.

Workshop resumed at 3:07 pm

Chair NeSmith had a question on Page 3. He asked if there was any collaboration with the different organizations applying for the grants.

Chief Hood stated they were independent and could apply for whatever their needs were.

Chair NeSmith asked how do they coordinate activities. Chief Walker appeared before the board and stated multiple departments could apply.

Commissioner Holt asked, if possible, to have a meeting with all them and have a list of the grants and applications and who was applying for what and what their needs were.

Chair NeSmith stated they need more collaboration and understanding.

Commissioner Simpkins stated as a County, they were responsible for the Fire Departments. It still falls under GCBOCC as their responsibility and asked if that was correct. Mr. Dixon stated it was the County's responsibility.

Mr. Dixon stated how they have achieved it over the years was quite different. Some has been by contracting with the City of Quincy and expanding their reach. Every fire department has a very different number.

Commissioner Holt stated they needed an inventory of each fire station; how many grants have been received, who has not received grants, etc.

Commissioner Simpkins asked how they could do it differently because the way it is right now is not working.

Commissioner Green asked if they could see what their budget is.

Chair NeSmith asked if they had an overall proposal as to the needs. Chief Walker stated they met with them to see what their needs were.

Chair NeSmith asked if they see every entity's annual budget? Chief Walker stated yes.

Chair NeSmith asked what was the next major factor that affects ISO rating.

Commissioner Green said that was in the presentation and asked what it took to get fire hydrants in the appropriate places. Chief stated some areas of the county did not have Talquin as their primary water source, and some areas if there were water lines they were only big enough to supply water to the homes. He also said water lines had to be 6 inches or larger to put a hydrant on it.

Commissioner Green asked how they could change that? Mr. Dixon stated generally that would be a Talquin question. Talquin requires them to pay for the line.

Chair NeSmith asked about the five-mile radius circle and if the white areas were the only areas that were not within a fire department. Chief Walker stated yes. Chair NeSmith asked if all of the fire hydrants in the county were working and Chief Walker said that if one was found to not be working, he is contacted and he puts a black bag over the hydrant and contacts Talquin for it to be repaired.

Commissioner Green stated there could be some that did not work that the Chief was not aware of. He asked if anyone knew of hydrants that did not work, to please let the chief know so they could be identified.

Commissioner Holt stated they need to be able to have people to get into the stations the County owns and if there was a fire, they would be able to get equipment. They also needed to look at interchangeable equipment.

Commissioner Green stated he liked the possibility of the dual certification and asked if there was any funding available for hiring at any one of the entities as of right now and if they were advertising.

Mr. Dixon stated they now hire dual certified officers. Chief Hood stated they have 24 full-time staff and 5 flex personnel.

Commissioner Green asked if they had available funding now in the budget to advertise for more firefighters or more dual certified people. Mr. Dixon stated they have applied for the SAFER Grant.

Chief Hood stated they have 3 full-time open positions.

Commissioner Green stated they need to make sure they were building a great foundation. They need to keep in mind that EMS already has a challenging job.

Commissioner Holt asked what was the proximity to the gear they need because they may be housed in different locations. Chief Hood stated as far as gear, the 2 ambulances that were approved and purchased in October, they started the revamping of the model and how outlaid so any future ambulances will have the ability to carry bunker gear.

Chair NeSmith when stated they would pause and allow the speaker that requested to be heard come up to the Board.

Danny Hunter, City of Gretna Fire Chief and Nathaniel Yarusso, Midway Fire Chief, appeared before the Board and gave a presentation on Fire Service in Gadsden County.

He said they have focused on expanding the municipalities' ability to provide more enhanced fire services towards PT/FT staffing, with enhanced funding to independent Volunteer Fire Departments. He stated not all fire departments were 501C3, they were city organizations and not non-profits; while many of the independent stations in the county was. He said throughout the county there were six municipals and six independent departments that covered 520 square miles, serving 43,826 residents and 34 miles of Interstate 10. He stated in all of this discussion one thing that had not been touched on was hazmat. He said there was a lot of bad "juju" that rides up and down the interstate and we have been very fortunate so far that there has been no significant incident there but was just a matter of time.

He spoke on ways to expand the municipalities to provide more enhanced fire service throughout the unincorporated areas of the County.

Chief Yarusso said they were in their second year of becoming a combination department. Their Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays were 24 hours covered with paid, certified part-time firefighters. The goal next year is to have 24-hour coverage Monday – Friday with at least one part-time certified firefighter per shift. As the city grows, they plan to add as well and seems to be working. He said they needed to try to engage more young people. Chief Hunter said they have spoken with the School Superintendent about a dual enrollment program between the school district and TCC Pat Thomas Law Enforcement Academy. He also stated they had to be proactive with fire trucks because they were looking at one year out before receiving one.

Commissioner Green thanked him for a thorough presentation and asked if Mr. Hunter had had an opportunity to meet with Chief Walker.

Commissioner Holt said she was happy when he touched on grants and grant writers and stated cities could apply for funding for their fire stations because they do not need a 501c3. She also stated they'd needed to see that call and response log from the dispatchers and that would show who was called. She stated she liked the incentives idea and wrote down about dual enrollment at the schools. She asked Chief Hunter if the TCC/Pat Thomas Facility had hazmat training and Chief Hunter was unsure but knew they did the firefighter standards.

Commissioner Simpkins stated she was under the impression that since the ISO rating, it had been a hot topic and thought they were collaborating and was a “big piece” for her with the municipalities collaborating with the County. She said that was how they would progress even with individual municipalities. She asked if there had been meetings with the municipalities and the county. He said the municipalities meet quarterly and were very involved but as it related to the ISO, they were going to wait to get feedback to see how the board felt.

Commissioner Green asked if they were having any young people in the summer program work in EMS and Fire Services. Mr. Dixon stated where they could and they would work with CareerSource next year to put kids in some type of fire prep in the summer to help build interest.

Chief Hunter said that would be a great training opportunity and worth the investment.

Commissioner Hinson thought a friendly word they could use instead of assessment would be generated revenue. He also stated the Home Insurance when up and not necessarily because of the ISO rating.

Commissioner Simpkins stated the ISO ratings only played a small part in the increase of the insurance. However, it was still important because if there is a 10 when people were trying to renew their insurance, some insurance companies will not renew at a 10 rating.

Mr. Dixon said they needed to get a third-party consultant involved to see what models were available.

Commissioner Simpkins said she spoke with the state fire marshal herself and he was unable to be there today but was told they could sit with them and get them a model so they would be able to move in the right direction.

Commissioner Holt stated they were responsible for safety and needed to do what they have to do in order to make sure they have fire protection. She said they needed to have the County Administrator check with the Fire Marshall and with independents and look it both because the budget season was coming up.

Commissioner Green stepped out at 4:43 pm

Commissioner Green returned at 4:46 pm.

Commissioner Simpkins said they needed to contact the State Fire Marshall and see when they were available to come speak with them.

Commissioner Holt stated to get them both to come before the Board to discuss this.

Chair NeSmith asked the County Administrator in order for them to bring in an independent, would they have to check the budget? Mr. Dixon stated they could do an RFI

Gadsden County Board of County Commissioners
April 25, 2023 – Fire Services Workshop

MOTION TO ADJOURN

**THERE BEING NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD, CHAIR NESMITH DECLARED
THE WORKSHOP ADJOURNED AT 4:48 P.M.**

GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA

**KIMBLIN NESMITH, Chair
Board of County Commissioners**

ATTEST:

NICHOLAS THOMAS, Clerk