

AT A WORKSHOP OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS IN AND FOR GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA ON MARCH 12, 2024 AT 5:00 PM, THE FOLLOWING PROCEEDING WAS HAD, VIZ:

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

CALL TO ORDER, INVOCATION, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Green called the meeting to Order. He gave the Invocation and then led in the Pledge of Allegiance.

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.

Chair Green read the above statement.

Morris Duncan, 1896 Kemp Road, Havana, FL

Kathryn Voight, 4131 Tallavana Trail, Havana, FL

Doug Croley, 255 Longview Lane, Havana, FL 32333

Matt Weslowski, Havana Council Member

Lawrence Reed, Havana Council member

Tabatha Nelson, Havana Council member

Karen Watson, 1795 Attapulugus Highway, Quincy, FL

GENERAL BUSINESS

1. Discussion and direction regarding the Fire Services Contract with the Town of Havana

Mr. Dixon stated they were requested by Town of Havana to discuss the fire services contract.

Tabatha Nelson appeared before the board. She stated they want to continue to partner with the County and provide fire service for their residents. They have reviewed multiple versions of the contract and they were willing to discuss the version that the county provided the Quincy Fire Department. She stated their request for funding was \$105,000 with a one-and-a-half-year contract. The \$75,000 contract amount and the \$30,000 stipend.

Kendra Wilkerson, Town Manager, then appeared before the Board. She stated they had concerns regarding the stipend program. She asked when the funds are used up in the first quarter, what was the expectation on the firefighters to continue to respond with no compensation.

Chair Green asked what they were putting into the stipend program. Ms. Wilkerson stated the contract as written stated the town will fund half of the stipend cost or calls inside the town limits.

Ms. Nelson said they liked Quincy's fire contract; the contract Havana was given was different and volunteers cannot commit to it. The issue when they first started was that when they were given new contracts, it went from a 2 page to 10-page contract. She stated the way it was worded makes their volunteer services non-existent. They want a 1 ½ year contract.

Ms. Wilkerson stated the volunteer firefighters are happy to protect this community, not just in the town limits of Havana. They felt that the county should be paying 80% of funding.

Matt Weslowski appeared before the Board. He stated 86% of their calls happen in the county.

Lawrence Reed appeared before the Board. He stated they want to work with the county and they want to serve Gadsden County. They cannot afford to keep working it out. They cannot

afford to keep doing it like they are.

Doug Croley appeared before the board. He made it clear he did not live in the Town of Havana but was dependent on the Town for fire services. They need to recognize Havana needs help. They need to better address this because Havana has lost ISO rating; they are now a 10. They need to help get better fire ratings. He stated they need to be focused on five road miles.

Kathryn Voight appeared before the Board; Board member of Tallavana Homeowners Association. She stated she was impacted and she did not live within Town of Havana but serviced by them and ISO has dropped. She hoped they consider their request for additional funding.

Morris Duncan appeared and stated he called Havana home for 34 years. He spoke on how talented the Havana Volunteer fire department is. He had a rental house that caught fire last year, it was a wood frame house built in 1935, it did not take long for it to go. Havana and Coonbottom fire departments came and stated anything that can be done to help would be appreciated.

Karen Watson appeared and stated she lived on Attapulgas Highway just shy of three miles from the Quincy fire department but is rated with Robertsville that is more than 5 miles from her house. She stated her Homeowner's insurance has jumped over \$7000 because of this. The 5-mile radius was not being considered and felt the contract would help clear up a lot of gray area. Her understanding was that the contract was sent to the city but not signed. Mr. Dixon stated yes.

Chair Green asked if Mr. Dixon or Chief Hood could explain how they came up with their numbers in this contract. Mr. Dixon stated they have the whole county to consider, including working with Quincy and other departments. It has been a problem for many years. He stated the Board directed him to stabilize the situation and that was what they were trying to do. He stated Quincy was looked at differently because they have a 24/7 manned station, therefore the contract was different. They looked at numbers in terms of what they could afford.

Chief Hood said the goal was to stabilize the situation. Every municipality was the same; they are all responding into the County areas. He stated they were almost at \$1.1 Million for contractual fire services. He asked the Havana Town Council about wanting to mimic the Quincy contract but they also stated that they were different. Some municipalities were paying to have a 24/7 manned station.

Chair Green asked Chief Hood if they have a ball figure on calls being answered. Chief Hood stated he did not have that information but he could get that for him. He stated the east side of the county is busier.

Commissioner Hinson wanted to piggyback on what Chief Hood just said about the east side being busier. He stated when looking at the census, everything was moving more to the east. He asked if it was reasonable to add additional resources to Havana Fire Department due to its increased calls. It was a question he wanted them to think about. He asked if they were putting limitations/rules on volunteer firemen that would stop them from becoming a firefighter.

Mr. Dixon stated that Commissioner Hinson hinted on a formula and there was no formula. The goal is to get the formula together and establish a base. He stated there had to be stabilization and standardization. Mr. Dixon stated they not only have Havana and Coonbottom but they just built a new fire station in Greenshade/Dogtown. He knows they need to increase across the county; 10 ratings all across the county.

Commissioner Holt said they were looking at the ability to look at everyone the same. She believed the County needs a county-wide fire service and she will be pushing for that. She stated they have 7-11 fire stations. She stated they have had Dispatch calling certain fire stations and not call the others and that built up certain calls from the Dispatcher. She said they had to call in in order to find out what was happening and she knew by the firetrucks that showed up who they were calling. She hoped that was not going on now. She was happy with the contract offered now. They need to look at having a full-time station on the east and west side of the county to have regional coverage. She stated that the verbiage in the contract cannot be the same because Quincy has a 24/7 full-time manned station. She stated she was interested in

finding out what was the difference in the contracts that they may have a problem with.

Commissioner Holt stated she was unhappy with the amount because they were going to have to figure out what to do with it.

Ms. Wilkerson stated based on the analysis and after the review with their legal counsel, the proposed contract they are willing to negotiate on is a 1 1/2-year term, funding for stipend and certified fire fighter bonus proposed by the county; includes funding by the county for 86% of their revised budget, elimination of unnecessary added administration and control being proposed by the county contract including training requirements, elimination of possible firefighter requirements above state mandate, elimination of county proposed requirements that do not improve fire service, only increased oversight by the county. Havana just added 11 new firefighters and almost \$10,000 each to outfit them. Havana does not have the resources to equip new firefighters they have.

Commissioner Simpkins said, as a Board, they have to realize the dynamics of the county is different. When they look at actual increases that took place with municipal fire departments, Havana received a 1% funding increase and asking for a 34% increase. She stated when they look at the numbers and what was stated when 86% of the calls were taken place in the unincorporated areas of the county and they were taking the 86% of the Town of Havana's calls were in that particular area, they need to take that in consideration. Havana has also allowed their employees to answer calls so cost to them allowing their employees on clock to go take care of calls in unincorporated areas. She stated they could not compare each municipality the same because the affordability was different. After the ISO situation was brought to her attention, they had a workshop at Tri-Eagle and it never came back to the table until a few weeks ago. Commissioner Simpkins stated they needed to look at numbers and services being provided and fund them accordingly. She stated they have \$1.1 Billion in the budget now and was curious as to what will it be if they decide to do a county fire service. She asked if it dealt with 5-mile radius in the contract. Mr. Dixon said it was in the Havana document, not county document. Commissioner Simpkins asked her fellow commissioners to take a look at what was in the best interest of the citizens as a whole. If Town of Havana does not answer calls, they would be in trouble.

Chair Green asked if the Town of Havana and the County does not come to a resolution of the contract, what would they fall back into? Mr. Dixon stated if Havana does not continue the contract, the other option would be to staff up the Dogtown facility and relocate resources to that area to respond to fire. He stated they had to look at this in a whole new way, not just in Havana.

Commissioner Hinson asked Chief Hood about the percentage given to Quincy. The County gave around 20%. Chief Hood said they had a 3-year contract from 2107-2021; they asked for an increase. Commissioner Hinson stated to be fair about the situation and go up at least 35%.

Mr. Croley re-appeared before the Board to clarify something. He told the County Administrator he appreciated the remark he made regarding if they could not come to terms with Havana, he would make them dependent on the Greenshade fire station. Mr. Dixon said he did not mean defund Havana.

Mr. Croley continued and said fire protection based upon emergency communications, fire departments and equipment, water supply, ability to respond, and the water supply was the major thing. That was why he asked if they were still maintaining their hydrant program. He stated that Greenshade was at a disadvantage by not having a central water supply. Mr. Croley mentioned that he has a fire hydrant within 1000 feet of his house that he paid for; bought from Talquin and turned it over to County for access. He stated water supply was very important and very important to have a business relationship with Havana for those in unincorporated areas with the Havana fire department. He stated it was very disturbing that there would be any consideration to not work out with some agreement with Havana. The majority of the population is on the eastern side of the county; naturally more houses, businesses, more exposure, more calls. Mr. Croley said they could not treat every community on an equal basis. They have to go by where exposure is and where response is needed. He told the Chair that he was counting on him to make leadership happen because it was needed.

Mr. Weslowski reappeared and asked for clarification on Mr. Dixon's comment about funding Greenshade. Mr. Dixon said the goal was never to "defund" Havana.

Chair Green said they will give as of right now, \$50,000 but if they do not accept that, question was, if Board does not offer any additional funding and they do not accept that, what is the plan? Mr. Dixon said they will follow the direction of the Board.

Commissioner Holt wanted to clarify that the reason of the increase in other stations was because they were underfunded and never funded correctly because they weren't getting calls. Dispatcher wasn't calling them. She said she knew that because she "sat in front of Gretna's fire station, had a young man to call in for a house next door and everyone was called but Gretna" and she stood in front of the fire station. The goal was to get them to where they should have been and look for funding for more. Commissioner Holt said "we're not a cash cow".

Commissioner Green stated he was glad to know other stations received an increase, but he wanted to be fair across the Board as far as stabilizing. He stated the whole energy needed to shift. Commissioner Simpkins said he hit the nail on the head and had nothing else to say.

Commissioner Hinson thanked the Town of Havana and the manager and council people for coming. He thanked Mr. Croley for all he's done. He also thanked the community for coming out in support of this project.

Commissioner Holt said to don't do for one that don't do for others. The reporting should be the same; documentation should be the same. She stated for it to be all fair and give the same percentage.

Commissioner Simpkins said the other municipalities signed their contract; Havana had a problem with theirs. Havana was now presenting their contract and their requests.

John Browning appeared and stated they do have volunteer firefighters. He stated that Unincorporated fire departments have not the signed contract because of miscellaneous provisions.

Commissioner Holt asked what was difficult. Mr. Browning said being Fire 1 certified. They have

to sign a contract that they are Fire I, Fire II, etc.

Chief Hood reappeared and stated he received a memo today from Chief Maxwell, Wetumpka and they have concerns about the way the contract reads. Mr. Dixon said the Attorney will get with them; it was a misunderstanding in the contract.

Commissioner Hinson wanted to make sure it was clear that insurance went up and it had nothing to do with BOCC. Mr. Dixon said yes, the portion of the insurance was because of ISO rating, part because of being in the State of Florida because of hurricanes, etc.

MOTION TO ADJOURN

THERE BEING NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD, CHAIR GREEN DECLARED THE WORKSHOP ADJOURNED AT 6:40 P.M.

GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA

RONTERIOUS GREEN, Chair
Board of County Commissioners

ATTEST:

NICHOLAS THOMAS, Clerk