

**AT A WORKSHOP OF THE BOARD OF  
COUNTY COMMISSIONERS HELD IN AND FOR  
GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA ON JANUARY 17,  
2017 AT 4:00 P.M., THE FOLLOWING  
PROCEEDING WAS HELD, VIZ:**

**Present:** Sherrie Taylor, Chair, District 5  
Eric Hinson, Vice - Chair, District 1-arrived late  
Dr. Anthony "Dr. V" Viegbesie, District 2  
Gene Morgan, District 3  
Brenda Holt, District 4-arrived late  
Robert Presnell, County Administrator  
David Weiss, County Attorney  
Marcella Blocker, Deputy Clerk

**AGENDA ITEMS**

**1. Welcome**

Chair Taylor called the Workshop to order at 4:02 p.m. and said it was a fire services workshop. She asked everyone to stand for the Prayer and then led in the Pledge of Allegiance to the U. S. Flag.

She explained they had a meeting with a group of citizens that expressed some concerns with our volunteer firefighter program. She said the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the volunteer fire program and issues that may have arisen and how they can find resolutions to them. She spoke of the importance of lives and one of our most valuable possessions, our home. She said they strategically have fire departments throughout the County.

**GENERAL BUSINESS**

**2. Overview of the Volunteer Fire Departments**

Mr. Presnell said the workshop will be facilitated by Mr. Andre Walker and he will give an overview of the Fire Services Program. He said there are different options for preview.

Andre Walker, the Fire Coordinator/Paramedic, appeared before the Board and gave a presentation. He said it would include some of the changes that will be made to improve the fire services throughout the County to improve retention and fire services. He listed all 10 fire stations. He commented they have concerns with firefighters volunteering during the day hours. He said there are plenty of responders at night to respond to calls. He said, as a result, multiple units are dispatched to make sure the call is covered in a timely manner.

Commissioner Dr. Viegbesie asked if they would be asking questions at the end of his presentation or as he went along.

Chair Taylor said she would allow them to ask questions and thought to let him finish the presentation and they could then ask questions.

*Commissioner Holt arrived at this juncture of the meeting.*

Mr. Walker commented they are reiterating to make better. He continued the discussion on EMS where they have had the discussions with the dispatchers to ensure they send an ambulance with each fire call they dispatch as a safety measure. He stated that effective January 1, 2017, he and the Fire Chief respond to fire calls during the work hours. He disclosed they had a meeting last week with the Sheriff Department and they were looking into replacing all radio equipment and was still working on one side of the County where the reception was really bad and they would be putting in a repeater. He added at times, 911 calls have gone to Leon County and when the call would come in, they did not identify themselves and the caller did not realize the call had gone to Leon County. After a meeting, they are now identifying themselves upon answering, so the caller will realize their call has been routed to Leon. He noted that Gadsden has always identified them when they answered the phone.

He added they have applied for a grant to help with equipment and protective gear, but have yet to hear back from the grant at this time. He explained there were 2 options to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters.

*Commissioner Hinson arrived at this juncture of the meeting.*

Mr. Walker continued the discussion explaining the difference between the Local Firefighter Instructors Course and Florida State Fire College Online Course.

He went over what the Local Instructors were proposing for the Firefighter 1 Instructor course at \$2700 and the complete costs were \$9000.

Currently, funding was 50% of revenue generated by Small County Surtax. He gave an example of how other counties had supported their fire program.

He added that Liberty County adopted a ½ cent sales tax November 2016; projected \$250,000 per year; primary usage is to hire part-time fire coordinator and upgrade fire vehicle and future plans to hire paid firefighters.

Leon County has Municipal Service Benefit Unit; seen on residents utility bills; fee-based on the size of homes. They had to receive permission from the City of Tallahassee.

Jackson County has no fire tax. They operate on the money given to them by the County.

Jeff Price appeared before the Board and gave funding options. He said presently they receive 5.4 million on the small county surtax that is split equally between fire rescue and public works. He stated one of the options is to change the ordinance, so the public works half goes to fire and rescue to replace the half that was public works they are suggesting imposing a local option gas tax 5 cents and 9 cent motor fuel tax that would bring in around \$250,000 totaling 1.5 million that would replace the tax that they took. Another option out there is the MSVU for fire assessment. He said it is based on some preliminary numbers from the Property Appraiser.

Chair Taylor said it was a well put-together presentation and they had several speaker request forms.

Commissioner Morgan said they were pointing out 2 options of funding

Commissioner Dr. Viegbesie recalled at the previous meeting, he suggested they explore the creation of special fire services district. He also commended Mr. Walker for a job well-done and said the keyword in unincorporated areas was “volunteer”. He said the numbers were dropping and he felt it was because they were not being paid. He added it would help to do a good assessment.

Commissioner Holt asked about the Municipal Service Benefit Unit (MSBU) Tax, which administers the non- advalorem assessments levied for various local improvements within the unincorporated boundaries of the County.

She asked if they could not get what they wanted, could they do a step-plan. She commented on 2-3 things they may need the first year.

Commissioner Hinson said he felt the other commissioners hit on what he wanted to say and this was a very important issue. He reiterated the importance of making sure infrastructure is in place. He said the County is doing a good job. He thanked the Chair for leading the conversation. He said he was excited about the progress being made.

#### **CITIZENS REQUESTING TO BE HEARD ON NON-AGENDA ITEMS**

Rev. Shirlean Thomas, P.O. Box 21, Quincy, FL, Pastor of Greenshade AME, she commented on the Greenshade/Dogtown Volunteer Fire Department (VFD). She said she was present as a proponent and supporter of VFD in Greenshade Area & commended them for efforts they have put in place thus far. She said as pastor of a church in the local community this is a concern for many of her parishioners who live in the area. She said the fire had taken the lives of 4 and this was a big issue in this community.

Linda Clemons, 621 David Clemons Road, Quincy, FL 32352, appeared before the Board on the Greenshade/Dogtown VFD. She said on behalf of District 2 they appreciate the steps being made. She said her concern was on David Clemons Road they have had 6 fires since 2010 and lost 4 lives in 1 fire as previously mentioned. She said a lot of the homes are older and are located about 10 miles from the volunteer fire department and 13-15 miles from the major one. She added there is not even a fire hydrant in close proximity.

Commissioner Dr. Viegbesie said one of the concerns Ms. Clemons raised was his concern about fire truck running out of the water. He said the area she is talking about is what is called a dead-zone. He commended Commission for purchasing 2 acres to build a fire station, which was much needed in this area.

Mr. Walker said when truck filled with water, is overflow reservoir

Commissioner Hinson commended Mr. Walker for a great presentation. He said he was all for fire safety, but he felt there should be a plan in place such as Blueprint 2000 or Blueprint 2020 that the City of Tallahassee presented. He voiced he wanted more of a Strategic Plan. He wanted them to show how everyone could benefit bring the Chamber, GCDC and other players to the table.

Commissioner Holt also thanked Mr. Walker for the presentation. She said that area has been a dead zone for as long as she could remember. She recalled Davin Suggs; former Budget Director had put together a bond and used infrastructure dollars to put in a fire station. She added that she was not sure if that was right or how he did it but felt it was worth looking into. Asked how could they get funding?

Mr. Walker said the gas tax was the quickest, easiest way to get funding.

Commissioner Dr. Viegbesie said his understanding was those gas tax fees were for transportation, not fire needs. He recalled Commissioner Hinson mentioned the Tallahassee Blueprint where he was at the table as the head of the NAACP. He said it was the 1 cent sales tax that was specifically to be used for some projects; some came from the county and some from the city. He said each government has programs they select to use. He mentioned Leon County was different than Gadsden County because Leon only has one City in the County, whereas Gadsden has many. It makes it easier for them to do the Blueprint.

Commissioner Morgan said he appreciated the opportunity for everyone to come together and discuss this very important issue because they all care about the safety of everyone. He thanked all volunteer firefighters for their services. He mentioned there has been a lot of talk on how can generate additional funding dollars. He said first take a step back and look at how the dollars are invested and what we are doing now, maybe better way to do and it may not. He said it was something they should look into to see how much more funds would be needed.

He recalled upon being elected in 2008 one of the first things he looked at in 2009 was that one of his concerns was with the volunteer firefighters and how did they determine the amount of funding that went to each of the municipalities. He said no one could tell him how those dollars were allocated. He said what they found was those dollars were going into municipalities and they were getting put into their fund dollars. He stated the volunteer firefighters were not seeing the end results of those dollars. He said they had municipalities being paid out quarterly without providing any documentation on what the money was spent on. He commended everyone for coming together and looking at it. He said it was a lot of dollars saved this way. He said several things could be a fix. An immediate concern is a significant unmet need on the west side with communications with how the firefighters talk to each other during a call. He said it was determined that it was the repeater issue and they are looking for a tower tall enough. He said he has had conversations with vendors and Florida State Hospital, by way of saying maybe they can work together to get the problem solved. He said this is an immediate issue even if it's temporary until a permanent solution is found. He asked Mr. Walker if the problem with trucks being at fires with no water.

Mr. Walker replied no.

Commissioner Morgan asked how often you meet county-wide with the volunteers.

Mr. Walker said it started out once a month, now they meet every quarter at the Sheriff's Office.

Commissioner Morgan asked to have they are considering having in different areas locations of the different fire substations.

Mr. Walker said they had discussed, but felt the Sheriff’s Office was a central location.

Commissioner Morgan asked that there be a better line of communication moving forward if an issue aroused.

Lester Beach, 333 Miller Road, Havana, came before the Board on the Havana VFD County Truck replacement. He said he was a volunteer at Havana Fire Department. He said they have one of the oldest trucks which hold 750 gallons of water according to calculations and it is out of water in 2 minutes. He requested that a replacement truck meet the needs in the area.

**3. Questions/Comments**

Chair Taylor said based on conversations a panel would need to be established. She said they would need Talquin there along with other people that could bring in a smorgasbord of people.

Chair Taylor said she was petrified of a fire tax, she reiterated the county was not broke. She thought the BOCC could put together a panel and make part of regular meeting sessions. She then tasked the Administrator to talk with Leon, Wakulla, and Talquin; they need answers in the next month.

She asked Mr. Presnell if he heard what they said with regard to the panel, moving forward with the fire station and hydrants needed in certain areas.

Commissioner Holt asked Mr. Walker in using Wakulla had to use

Commissioner Dr. Viegbesie asked what they could do to work with Talquin to provide fire hydrants in needed areas. He commended Gadsden United for providing funding for some of Greenshade volunteers background checks.

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**Motion to Adjourn**

**THERE BEING NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD, CHAIR TAYLOR  
DECLARED IT ADJOURNED AT 5:51 P.M.**

**GADSDEN COUNTY, FLORIDA**

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**BRENDA HOLT, CHAIR  
Board of County Commissioners**

**ATTEST:**

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**NICHOLAS THOMAS, CLERK**