

APRIL 25, 2017 – SPECIAL MEETING

The Board of County Commissioners, Walton County, Florida, held a Special Meeting on April 25, 2017 at 12:30 p.m. at the Walton County Courthouse in DeFuniak Springs, Florida.

The following Board members were present: Commissioner Cecilia Jones, Chairwoman; Commissioner W. N. (Bill) Chapman, Vice-Chairman; Commissioner Tony Anderson; Commissioner Sara Comander; and Commissioner Melanie Nipper. Mr. Larry Jones, County Administrator; and Attorney Mark Davis, County Attorney; were also present.

Chairwoman Jones called to order the Special Meeting to hear an update from the Walton County Sheriff's Office and discuss the Fire Rescue Feasibility Study.

Major Joe Preston, Walton County Sheriff's Office, briefly reviewed the task of the committee to determine how the two entities could be merged. He discussed the different areas of expertise which gave viewpoints on the merger and to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (S.W.O.T.). He said the report was not intended to make specific recommendations.

Commissioner Chapman commented that other than staff there were no citizen representatives on the committee who lived north of the bay. He identified areas of the report which he felt needed more attention: 1. Lack of comparative data; 2. Comparables to other counties equal in size and demographics; and 3. Lack of the costs to merge the entities. He said the report left a lot of questions unanswered.

Motion by Commissioner Chapman, second by Commissioner Comander, to accept the report as presented and advertise an RFQ for an independent consultant to thoroughly review all details of a merger including the financial aspects.

Commissioner Nipper stated that Government Services Group (GSG) had performed a study in 2013. She discussed the funding needs for Fire Rescue. She said the operational changes need to occur.

Major Preston agreed the report did not present the concerns noted by Commissioner Chapman, but the committee did review some of those areas. There have been studies done in the past which address the funding issue. He said there was a funding issue and an operational oversight issue which needed to be addressed. The Walton County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) would still have to submit an in depth analysis of the issues. Commissioner Chapman stated the board has an obligation to take responsibility and not pass it off for others to handle. He said historically Fire Rescue and Public Works have been the first areas cut in the budget. He voiced that public safety should be a high priority and not be cut each year. The WCSO would still have the same funding issues. Commissioner Chapman addressed the rate increase recommended by GSG and said it is unfair to citizens who are on low or fixed income. He reported that 1% of the number of emergency calls last year were fire related. Commissioner Nipper agreed that it is the board's responsibility for public safety and the reason she requested the study.

Motion by Commissioner Nipper to move Walton County Fire and Rescue under the Walton County Sheriff's Office. Chairwoman Jones stated there was an active motion on the floor. The second motion was tabled to address the active motion.

Chairwoman Jones asked how much another study would cost. Commissioner Nipper responded the cost was nearly \$50,000.

Commissioner Comander agreed that it was the board's responsibility and discussed the impacts the recent recession had on the budget. She voiced concern that those with lower incomes will not be able to afford an increase in taxes. She said the report should be accepted and a

professional study done. Commissioner Comander noted that Chief Bobby Martin has only been in his position less than two years, the county has only recently taken over Freeport Fire, and the county is also trying to upgrade Paxton Fire. She adamantly opposed increasing the fire tax to the levels recommended by GSG and raising property taxes. She recommended a five year period to enhance and improve the fire stations.

Ms. Linda Morse voiced opposition to another feasibility study.

Sheriff Adkinson stated everyone wants what is in the best interest of the citizens. He said his office would work with the board in whatever capacity the board decides. He commended the board for taking steps to address the issues.

Commissioner Anderson questioned Commissioner Comander if she would vote for a tax increase if fire rescue was not turned over to WCSO. He said funding needs to be found to provide our firefighters with the equipment they need and give them the best protection possible. Commissioner Anderson said something needed to be done as soon as possible. Commissioner Comander said she is not willing to raise the fire tax to the levels recommended by GSG. She was not opposed to raising the fire tax in increments and voiced concern for those who could not afford the increased taxation. Commissioner Comander expressed her opposition to including EMS in the merger and suggested separating the two.

Mr. Danny Glidewell, Walton County Taxpayers Association, said his organization supported a professional study being done. He said funding is a problem and there are a large portion of people who cannot pay a significant increase in taxes. The board needs to determine the level of service to be funded. He spoke against the report saying it was flawed because there was no citizen representation from the north end of the county on the committee. He voiced concern

with the distances some homes are from fire stations and fire hydrants. Mr. Glidewell stated the board needed to determine what is feasible and what is necessary.

Chairwoman Jones said that the committee was opened for anyone who wanted to participate.

Mr. Gordon Porter discussed the need for a professional feasibility study and the damages increased taxes would have on the citizens. He encouraged the board to place the issue on a referendum and allow the citizens north of the bay to vote.

Ms. Bonnie McQuiston was opposed to another feasibility study and said fire rescue needed management, organization, and funding. She spoke in support of allowing the north Walton citizens to vote on the issue. She recommended an additional ½ cent surtax to help fund fire rescue.

Ms. Bernadette Canut spoke in opposition of an additional study and asked that a decision be made today. She expressed concern with the safety of the firefighters.

Mr. Thomas Mosley spoke in opposition of an additional feasibility study.

Mr. Frank Day asked if the prior feasibility studies had been voided. He stated the board had voted for a staged progression of MSBU payments.

Ayes 2, Nays 3. Jones Nay, Chapman Aye, Anderson Nay, Comander Aye, Nipper Nay.
Motion failed.

Motion by Commissioner Nipper, second by Commissioner Anderson, to move Walton County Fire Rescue under the operation of the Walton County Sheriff's Office.

Attorney Mark Davis, County Attorney, questioned if the motion included EMS. Commissioner Nipper said it did.

Commissioner Comander stated safety throughout the county should be considered and said there have been more employees injured in Public Works than there have been in Fire Rescue. Commissioner Anderson stated Fire Rescue is a high risk job and it is time to put Fire Rescue first.

Commissioner Chapman agreed that safety should be top priority and said there have been approximately three fire chiefs in 12 years with Chief Martin having only served two years. He discussed the plans that Chief Martin has to obtain equipment, station improvements, and salaries. He said previous boards did not adequately fund Fire Rescue. Commissioner Chapman discussed how the county took on the Volunteer Fire Departments at the request of the departments. Funding will be needed to place fire stations in accommodating areas.

Chief Martin briefly discussed a capital improvement plan which would implement changes within the next five years. He said a lot of the Fire Rescue problems were inherited and that some of the concerns have been resolved. He said there have been at least 50 issues resolved since he became chief. He said his plan included ways to obtain ladder trucks for the taller buildings, more tankers, more trucks, and have three fighters per truck with an increase to four firefighters after three or four years. Chief Martin discussed the effects the recession had on Fire Rescue. He said that the money which was available was spent in the best way possible.

Chairwoman Jones asked if there was a consistent training program. She said Chief Talbert, South Walton Fire Department (SWFD), had volunteered to facilitate training at no charge. Chief Martin discussed the developing training programs, the need for a training director, and the different partnerships which help to provide the training to EMS and Fire Rescue. He reported that Walton County Fire Rescue was one of the leaders in fire training classes. Chairwoman Jones asked how much money was received through grants. Chief Martin said over the years several

grants had been received, but none during the last two years. He is currently looking into two grants.

Commissioner Chapman stated a training director was needed to maintain the records to verify certification. He questioned if the training was required or voluntary. Chief Martin said the State mandates how many hours of training are necessary to renew the license every two years. Commissioner Chapman asked if there was a minimum number of training hours. Chief Martin said the firefighter has to be actively working with a fire department. Commissioner Chapman asked if there had been employees who waited to obtain the training nearer to the deadline for certification. Chief Martin stated an employee was terminated last year because his license had expired due to a lack of training. Discussion ensued on training requirements, programs, and the responsibility of the employee to attend training.

Attorney Davis stated the county contracted with the SWFD to run the EMS south of the bay and questioned if Commissioner Nipper intended to include the south Walton EMS. Commissioner Nipper said if it could not be included then it would not be.

Ms. Linda Morse questioned when the last time was the county applied for grants. Commissioner Chapman stated grants can be applied for, but there was no guarantee it would be awarded. Chief Martin stated the last grant was to purchase bunker gear and was done under Chief Coley. Ms. Morse said there are tax exceptions for indigent citizens.

Mr. Terry Raffield, firefighter, spoke in favor of placing Fire Rescue under the operations of the WCSO.

Mr. Mike Bellemy, representing firefighters, discussed his experience as a firefighter and spoke in support of placing Fire Rescue under the WCSO.

Mr. Terry L. Raffield, firefighter EMT, discussed the lack of training, the risks faced by firefighters/EMTs, and spoke in support of transferring the operations of the Fire Rescue to WCSO.

Ms. Melissa Brown, Fire Rescue, discussed issues such as the need for pay raises and equipment. She reported under Chief Martin her district has received a new ambulance, a new squad, and a new tanker. She said it would be a gradual process to make all the needed changes and believed Chief Martin would be able to move the department forward with the proper funding and staff. Ms. Brown stated she was head of the EMS Committee and that training classes have been offered every other month, but were poorly attended. She opposed the absorption of Fire Rescue by the WCSO.

Mr. Rich Allison spoke in support of transferring Fire Rescue to WCSO and said he felt the department had gone backwards. He said the county has failed to supply the Fire Rescue needs as it relates to staffing, management, and direction. Commissioner Chapman said last year the board budgeted to hire nine lieutenants, but those positions have not been filled due to union issues.

Mr. Glidewell said there are problems in fire rescue and feels the sheriff would do a professional job. However, this service is the responsibility of the board. He recommended finding a funding solution which would allow Chief Martin to implement his plans for growth. Mr. Glidewell stated if the department is placed under the WCSO, money will still be required. He recommended tabling the issue for six months and give Chief Martin an opportunity to work on the issues which have been properly identified and determine a funding source.

Sheriff Adkinson said it was not his intention to cause strife, but rather to improve the issues. He said whatever the board decides the WCSO will be 100% behind them. He said there

will be a level of expectation that must be met by all staff. He discussed the need to work within budgetary constraints.

Mr. Javier Canut, Union President, spoke in favor of the consolidation and discussed the issues regarding the lack of training. He stated the union is not blocking the lieutenant positions from being filled and said the fire chief refused to work with the union.

Attorney Davis cautioned the board to not discuss Collective Bargaining discussions and not to bargain away from the table under any circumstances.

Commissioner Comander fully supported a referendum to allow the citizens of north Walton County to decide what level of service they wished to receive.

Ayes 3, Nays 2. Jones Aye, Chapman Nay, Anderson Aye, Comander Nay, Nipper Aye.

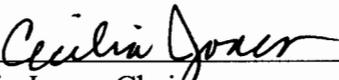
Attorney Davis stated the board needed to discuss terms of management and control, and to determine the timing of the transfer. Commissioner Nipper stated the takeover would begin today at the close of business. Commissioner Chapman stated the Sheriff had said he would need time to work out a transition plan. Chairwoman Jones asked how soon a transition plan could be submitted. Sheriff Adkinson said he would present a strategic plan for public review within 120 days. He said he would commit to working with the currently submitted budget for Fire/Rescue. Attorney Davis questioned if he was able to assume control today. Sheriff Adkinson stated management could be assumed today. He said it would take time to consult with Human Resources and Finance.

Mr. Larry Jones, County Administrator, recommended the Sheriff assume management duties at 7:00 a.m. April 26, 2017 being that is the end of the current shift.

Motion by Commissioner Nipper, second by Commissioner Anderson, to transfer operational control of the Walton County Fire/Rescue to the Walton County Sheriff's Office on

April 26, 2017 at 7:00 a.m. Ayes 3, Nays 2. Jones Aye, Chapman Nay, Anderson Aye, Comander Nay, Nipper Aye.

There being no further items to discuss, the meeting was adjourned at 2:05 p.m.

Approved: 
Cecilia Jones, Chairwoman

Attest: 
Alex Alford, Clerk of Courts and County Comptroller