

Wake County Fire Commission Meeting Highlights

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Here are belated highlights from the May 13 meeting of the Wake County Fire Commission. These are derived from listening to an audio recording, and as provided by the Wake County Fire Marshal's office. The notes represent both "big things" and "interesting things" that caught my ear. **Additions and corrections are welcome.** Yours Truly is not a professional paraphraser! Read the [agenda and related documents](#) for this meeting.

The recommend FY11 fire tax budget includes the following items:

- New Staffing - Nine positions, not allocated to a specific departments. That task will be performed by the Staffing Committee, which was the method previously used for allocating new positions. Funding begins no earlier than November 1.
- Garner Station 4 - Another seven positions are included in the operating expenses for Garner Station 4. These are cost-shared with the town, and begin in July, to coincide with start of the (county?) training academy.
- One-time merit increase for personnel, which mirrors the county's proposal. The increase is not intended to be recurring.
- Apparatus - Replacements for five engines, two rescues, and six small vehicles. Two of the engines are debt-financed, as they are for departments fully financed by the county. The rest of the engines are cash transactions, involving municipal cost-sharing.

Other budget items:

- The county had been paying for utilities at Fuquay-Varina Station 3, but it was not a budgeted item. This has been corrected in FY11.
- Pager and radio maintenance has been added as budget item. The county thought that departments were paying for same, but it was coming out of system-wide expenses. (Hope that's paraphrased correctly!)
- Expansion requests numbered 27, and there were small capital requests above and beyond what was budgeted for small capital.
- Three facility related requests were approved for the budget: kitchen renovations at Bay Leaf Station 3, HVAC repairs at Durham Highway, and siding/painting repair at Hopkins.

Other budget notes:

- The existing fire tax rate is maintained, at 8 cents.
- Debt appropriations are up 4 point something percent.
- Garner Station 4 cost less, due to better competition in worse economic times. Extra budgeted money left over.
- Other future available funds can or may include uncommitted and inactive funds in HEERY project phases, if the Wendell Falls station is delayed or discontinued due to growth changes, and if the Bay Leaf Station 1 replacement has further delays.
- The town of Wendell is included in the Fire Tax District. The district consists of all county unincorporated areas, plus the entire town. Thus, town residents play county and municipal taxes, as well as the fire tax. Interesting fact there.
- The county offsets (subtracts from) department budget allocations any revenue they generate. Such, say, if they collect rent from a building they own. The offset does NOT include fundraisers or other "sweat of brow" activities.
- Stony Hill's underground remediation at their old Station 1 is still ongoing, and is expected to continue through FY15, pending testing/results of active remediation.

Still other notes:

- Wake Forest's budget allocation has an \$18,000 adjustment. The story goes something like. A few years ago, the Budget Committee-- working with Wake Forest FD-- saw that the department's expenses were rising faster than could be supported by the fire tax. The committee had difficulty evaluating the appropriate appropriation, so they based the WFFD allocation on the average of the other department's budget increases. This year, Wake Forest FD provided information that made it easier for the Budget Committee to determine the right appropriation. Thus the increase, to raise their allocation to the level of actual service.
- There was a healthy discussion on the contingency/slush fund, which provides \$7,500 to each department for sundry use. There is a desire for tracking fund use by each department in future years. There was discussion about using the funds for personnel expenses, such as part time staffing or promotions. Does such use promote inequity in the system? An amendment was approved that the \$7,500 be used for tangible items only, and thus excluding personnel expenses. Same was passed (I believe).

Other agenda items:

Radio Recalibration

- Discussion of recalibrating the 800 MHz radios, as recommended by the manufacturer every couple years. The context is safety, and problems when the radios have problems. The county's radios are currently being rebanded, and could be recalibrated at the same time, and for three to five times cheaper than if done at another time. This was approved by the commission.

Service Agreement

- The Contract Committee has been working since August 2009, to revise the fire department service agreement. They've created drafts, presented to the Fire Commission, received feedback from Fire Chiefs, and incorporated changes. There are two contracts, one for private non-profits, and one for contracted municipalities. They differ in spots not applicable to municipalities, such as board of director compositions. Thus the municipal contracts contain "deleted for municipal contract" notes.
- New in the contract:
 - Board of Director composition.
 - Family members of the Fire Chief or Board President are not allowed.
 - Opportunities for citizens.
 - Non-compliance with the contract, and what should happen if a department doesn't comply.
 - Paragraph about compliance with the fire service compensation plan.
 - Provisions for additional financial controls reporting to the Boards of Directors.
 - Plan improving fire insurance ratings countywide, for departments not already rated as "6".
 - Additional training requirements.
 - Requirements for driver's license and criminal background checks, and conditions for disallowing department membership.

Discussion:

- Who polices the contract, a commission member asked. The contract says if the county has reasonable belief that a department is not acting in accordance with the contract, the county would do audit. If non-compliance was found, the county would give written notice to have 90 days to get into compliance. If they failed, the county has the ability to suspend some or all of their funds. This is a new addition to the contract.
- One of the assistant county attorneys met with the Contract Committee several times, and provided assistance with contract language.
- Question about background checks, and the particular language of "serious misdemeanor." The Contract Committee discussed this during their revision process, and wanted to address situation where people who have made a mistake in the past, but have since demonstrated credibility. The committee didn't want to get into hiring standards. Each department can and often does have their own guidelines, that can be more stringent. Committee wanted a minimum standard.
- Discussion about methodology for newly added plan for improving ratings. County notes that the plan is for improving only, and no actions would be taken that decreased insurance ratings.

Other:

- One commission member didn't realize that fire helmet colors were so varied between departments. Is standardization desirable? White means chief is most places. Yellow can be anything from probationary up to captain. Etcetera. It is a money issue. Also a safety issue, as a commission member cited. An arriving mutual aid department member once grabbed a black-helmeted firefighter and went inside and fought fire. Well, that black helmet meant probationary. County staff suggests Equipment Committee do a study, to see what is being used, and might be recommended. If nothing else, could standardize probationary color helmets.
- During the public comment period, the Stony Hill Fire Chief complimented the Budget Committee and county staff for their work. He requests more analysis next year, and with considerations of equity with regard to what it costs to operate a fire station. He submitted some examples this year to the Budget Committee. He notes, for example, that Stony Hill operates two stations, virtually 24 hours a day, with a combined staff, and at a cost of about \$800 less per year than the average single station. This is an area that he feels needs to be addressed. Look at what departments actually do, and what they actually need to operate. Not necessarily based on call volume. He wanted the suggestion recorded in the minutes, thus his public comment.

Isn't BLFD St.3 the old Six Forks station? If so, why isn't EMS cost-sharing the kitchen renovation, and why is there a kitchen renovation to begin with? From what I understand from a few BLFD personnel, they are off the clock for lunch and NOT a 24 hour coverage station?? So who uses the Kitchen? Corrections...???

J.Boggs ([Email](#)) - 05/31/10 - 00:08

It's interesting how we're able to obtain more detailed and timely information from Mike than from the official minutes of the fire commission (which are sent out JUST before the next meeting). Regardless, Mike's information is more detailed and readable. Thanks Mike – for keeping everyone informed!!

A.C. Rich - 05/31/10 - 09:07

Thanks for the thanks, AC. This particular blast of information is unusual in the level of detail, and directly due to relying upon an audio recording. It's a bit harder in person. You can't rewind and replay. Or I might be tuned out. Would like to do more, but time remains the constraint. Couple hours to listen and compose every two months— if I transcribed after every meeting from audio— is still time taken away from all the other stuff, blogging, photography, historical society, the newsletter, RFD research, general research, etc. It never ends.

Legeros - 05/31/10 - 09:59

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