

Fire Commission Highlights Part 1

09/25/10 1326 W - + 10 - 3

Here's a bit of what happened on Thursday night. There are probably (certainly?) "political" nuances that I missed, as well as outright details that didn't catch my attention. Readers are welcome to fill gaps, add comments, throw tomatoes, etc.

The first 80-some minutes were spent discussing the recommendations of the Staffing Committee, regarding allocating nine full-time firefighter positions that were approved for this budget year. Here's how that works. One of the subcommittees of the Fire Commission is the Staffing Committee. They're comprised of commission members or their designates.

They gathered information from all county fire departments that were interested in one or more of the nine positions, then met and decided which departments should be recommended to receive which positions. [As this document notes](#), they arrived at four proposals, and used forced decision-making to arrive at a final recommendation. Three people each for Bay Leaf, Fairview, and New Hope.

Both Swift Creek and Western Wake declined to be considered for the positions, it was noted at the meeting. Falls was also excluded from the process, and for reasons that the Commission and the Staff Committee Chair also noted at the meeting. Falls and Wake Forest had been previously working toward a merger of their departments. Because of same, the Staffing Committee removed Falls from consideration of allocated positions during their analysis process. A Commission member called attention to this Thursday night, and stated that the merger is no longer happening. The Staffing Committee Chair noted that the Staffing Committee had been under the presumption/assumption that the merger was still taking place.

The need of Falls for staffing was also noted in the context of the Commission's long-range business plan, as well as staffing goals established some years ago, that has sought two full-time positions at each county fire station as a long-term objective. There was also a question asked of awarding New Hope positions, when they already have two people both Station 1 and Station 2. "Why are we upgrading New Hope to three people, when Falls doesn't even have one person," asked one.

The issue of Falls exclusion from the process was noted a couple times and by a couple different Commission members. No action however was taken to halt or pause the process, prior to voting on the recommendation, to establish the current state of the merger and thus determine if Falls should or should not be excluded. (Those are my words and perception, versus anything voiced that directly by Commission members.) It was also noted that Falls is the last county department that says they need staff.

Also in the mix of the hour-plus discussion on staffing recommendations were questions about part-time positions and funding, and budget monies therein. This was harder to follow, and perhaps others can more accurately summarize.

One Commission member directed a line of questioning to Bay Leaf, Fairview, and New Hope about their present funding of part-time positions, and how that money could be re-purposed if they were granted full-time positions. Meaning, if the part-time people were no longer needed, where would those salaries be directed? (Though isn't that apple to oranges, and an entirely different animal for an entirely different discussion? A budget meeting, or that committee therein?)

Each department spoke to the Commission about their current staffing levels/models, and part-timers they use, and day people, and such. Fairview spoke about their plans, and noted that they could convert their part-time monies into a fourth full-time position, should they be awarded the three positions. This led to a discussion of "what do you/can you do with a single firefighter," when everything in the fire service "must be divisible by three." As in, three shifts for full-time coverage. This concept/issue of "divisible by three" was raised a couple times. At another point, it was noted that due to the intricacies of labor laws, part-time firefighters cost twice as much as full-time firefighters, for the same span of coverage. (I know, very simple recounting there.)

The Fire Commission Chair asked some interesting questions about New Hope and their call volume, and how many calls from Station 1—the station where the new positions would go, I believe-- are inside the city. (Annually, of the station's 1400 calls, 1000 are into the city.) And this led to explanation of call volume into county, and the many mutual aid calls that Station 1 runs with other departments. (Another interesting factoid, asked of New Hope. How many Raleigh fire stations are in the vicinity of Station 1.Five.) It was mentioned that while New Hope goes into the city on automatic aid, so does the city go into the county. "One hand washes the other," cited the New Hope Chief.

Bay Leaf took the proverbial stand to discuss their part-time positions, and intentions for re-purposed funding. Their Fire Chief also noted some

interesting factoids about their department. They have lowest EMS rates in the county, around 33% of calls. This they attribute to the absence of medical facilities and nursing homes, and which is probably related to building restrictions in the Falls watershed. Thus the majority of their calls—and a greater percentage than other department in the county—are fire calls. They also noted that their district has no business or industry, and thus all of their volunteers work outside the district. Thus their great need for day-time personnel, to compensate for the lack of volunteer availability. (The Chief also opened his comments with the acknowledgment that he's been on both sides of the staffing issue and process, and it's a difficult one.)

The Bay Leaf Chief discussed how they would use the three positions, and then proposed an alternate plan for the Fire Commission to consider and hopefully approve. The Chief requested consideration of the 6/3 plan that the Staffing Committee considered in their decision process. That plan would give Bay Leaf six people and Fairview three. The Chief noted that they could convert the freed part-time positions to a full-time position, and thus Bay Leaf would only need five of the six positions. They could return the sixth position to another department. The Chief noted there was precedent for the Fire Commission to override a committee recommendation. The Commission did not proceed with consideration of the 6/3 (really 5/3) request from Bay Leaf, and returned to discussion of the 3/3/3 plan recommended by the Staffing Committee.

After over an hour of all this discussion—including a couple rounds of comments by Commission members to the effect of "are we beating a horse here"—a vote was finally taken, though rapidly enough that an exact count of votes wasn't easy to perceive from the bleachers. (Though Yours Truly actually sits near the front of the room. Hope nobody stuck a "kick me" sign on my back!) One Commission member voiced for the record—for the Fire Marshal to record in the minutes-- that he voted against the recommendation from the Staffing Committee. There may have been others? The minutes should reveal all.

Second part to be composed after reviewing the audio recording of the meeting, since I left early.

Finally, an observation. Neither these minutes, nor even idle attendance as observer to these meetings does the process (and a strengths and flaws) justice. I think you have to be actively engaged (and probably participating) in the business and workings of the Fire Commission, to appreciate its power and span of influence. You want to compel or change things? Get immersed. It doesn't seem like there's really any other way. "It ain't all pretty, but it's what we got" goes the ZZ Top lyric that I am probably misremembering.

""One hand washes the other," cited the New Hope Chief" and the taxpayers get thrown out with the bathwater. Houses have no or less than std FFs and they fund a 6th engine for N Raleigh. Who is in charge here?

Andy - 09/27/10 - 06:36

Well once again it comes down to numbers. If you have three members on the staffing committee that are affiliated with your department in some form or fashion you will get the staffing they need. Those that don't currently have any get the shaft.

Rauer - 10/01/10 - 15:25

Raleigh FD, please take over the county and put it out of its misery!

John Pershing - 10/01/10 - 21:09

Name: (real name
preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Comment:

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

/ [Textile](#)