

UPDATED: Bethesda Fire Department Asks County to Take Over

04/03/13 430 W - + 8 - 1

April 3

[Here are the documents](#) related to the Durham County Board of Commissioner's aciton item, from their April 1 meeting agenda on this topic.

They were downloaded from [this site](#).

March 30

[The Herald-Sun yesterday reported](#) (and also featured on [FireNews.net](#)) that the Bethesda Fire Department in Durham County has asked the county to assume their operations. Their Board of Directors contacted the county on February 28, informing that they voted to dissolve their non-profit corporation and transfer to the county the responsibility for daily operations. County Commissioners will be briefed on Monday with a proposal for Durham County to take over the fire department's operations. This will begin the transition process.

The Bethesda Volunteer Fire Company, Inc. was incorporated on December 19, 1963. They operated out of a two-bay brick station on South Miami Boulevard just south of Highway 70. They later expanded to a larger station built in 1982 beside the original one, and continued with expansion with a second station (called a substation back in the day) at 7305 Leesville Road in 1985. They answered calls (including as an EMS agency, correct?) in a "large swath of eastern and southeastern Durham county," which included unincorporated portions of the Research Triangle Park.

They're primarily funded from a special property tax for their district that's capped by law at 10 cents per \$100 of assessed value. They have also received funding from Durham and Raleigh, for contracted services to municipal areas or as compensated (by law) for unincorporated areas annexed into a city. Their recent loss of a "fairly sizable contract" from Raleigh (for auto-aid for Station 24 and Station 23, correct?) has contributed to the department's financial issues, notes the County Manager. (Some figures are cited in the article, showing a net loss in FY11.)

How will the county operate the fire department for less? The county, using state-granted authority, can create a new service district to replace Bethesda's. This can have identical boundaries, but a higher tax rate. It's expected to start at 13 cents per \$100 of assessed value. Other changes will include converting the department's nineteen full-time firefighters to county employees, and converting the part-time positions into their full-time equivalents.

Presently, Durham County is served by seven independent fire departments: Bahama, Bethesda, Lebanon, Parkwood, Redwood, and two others must be in adjoining counties. Readers can probably fill in the holes. Next question, how's this as a trend throughout the state? Where counties are "getting into the fire department business" for the first time, versus the more established route of municipal or private mergers?

The two other fire departments in Durham Co are Eno and New Hope from Orange Co. Both departments have Durham Co districts.

OC Fireman - 03/30/13 - 11:57

I wish all Wake County FF's were County employees. It would provide retirement and stability for all those who depend on it for their livelihood.

CFF - 03/30/13 - 22:24

So if I am understanding the wording in the documents correctly Bethesda isn't actually shutting down but merely changing their name to now be able to accept county tax dollars?

RescueRanger - 04/03/13 - 22:48

Interesting stuff. Mike has it right with the following explanations; the not-for-profit corporation is closing, there will no longer be a Board of Directors. Employees who remain will be county employees with the new county department reporting to possibly the fire marshal. Interesting to see if all staff will be kept, particularly admin. All assets will then be county owned and as such, likely self-insured, savings look to be \$50K. The change in tax is related to changes in General Statues that once allowed a FD to have a max of 10 cents, but "fire and rescue" disticts can have a max of 15 cents. Bethesda has long done both. As I understand it there are other moves afoot in Durham Co with the possibility of a

consolidated County FD.

D.Cates - 04/04/13 - 13:12

Some of their employees already were county employees already. They have a mixed batch currently.

Mike - 04/04/13 - 13:24

How will the comman structure work? Do they hire a chief officer to oversee operations? Does the Fire Marshal or their deputies start arcing that role??

Whatever they do, they're certainly fast tracking it!

Legeros - 04/04/13 - 13:31

Well, my thoughts are based on appendix #4 under proposed schedule for action on June 24, 2013 for the new budget adoption it allows for \$0 for **Bethesda Rural Fire District** but a \$TBD tax for the new **Bethesda Fire and Rescue service district**.

Rescue Ranger - 04/04/13 - 13:59

It's got to be called something. The new name is clear and easily defines the area and the services and matches with the current district. If a taxpayer looks at it, they see that rescue is now in it. They will see the same people and equipment, but I'm guessing there will be some change in logo. However many of the departments in "DCo" have a county based patch with the name of the district on top. Regarding tax districts, the names usually reflect the service and the area, it isn't reflective of who provides the service, ie. the Wake County Single Fire Tax District. If the county choses to contract with the City of Durham, Redwood, Parkwood, or "ABC Private" Fire Department they would be within their authority to do so. They could offer up 2 stations, apparatus and equipment and even offer up staffing. Having firefighters on the county payroll just make this a logical step for them to enter further into the service offering.

Of question though is then, who in DCo next seeks an adjusted Fire & Rescue District at an increased rate. At 13 cents they are not far behind the composite rate of the Durham FD which was in effect about 17 cents when calculated in the past. Finally, with this new rate the RTP will have 3 different fire tax rates, 13 cents in Bethesda, 10 cents in Parkwood and 8.2 cents in the Wake County Single fire tax district. That could lead to a whole new discussion...

D.Cates - 04/04/13 - 16:13

So my thinking is correct and to put it bluntly this is nothing more than a name change to increase tax revenue. By the way, I'm not attacking them in any way so please don't take it as such. However, I must say this comes rather abruptly after losing the contract with Raleigh. Curious to know if the runs into the city of Raleigh were figured in their operating cost even though the department no longer makes them?

Rescue Ranger - 04/04/13 - 20:19

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What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

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