

Notes on Wake County's Fire Tax District Budget

04/21/14 791 W - + 8 - 6

[As this prior posting notes](#), the Wake County Fire Commission meets on Thursday, to discuss the proposed FY15 budget for the Fire Tax District.

Though I was unable to attend any of the budget committee meetings, the agenda packet provides useful insight into the issues presently facing the fire commission and county fire service.

Here's my summary and notes on what's included in the document. Since I am playing connect-the-dots, feel free to advise corrections or contextual omissions. Lots of moving pieces here.

Fire Tax

- A single-rate tax is collected and administered by Wake County, to fund fire protection for (a.) unincorporated areas of Wake County via contracts with private fire departments (Bay Leaf, Stony Hill, etc.) and municipal fire departments (Apex, Fuquay-Varina, etc.), (b.) some co-funded rural/municipal-serving departments (Garner, Rolesville, Wake Forest), and (c.) the Wendell Fire Department.
- Everyone living in (a.) unincorporated areas or (b.) the town of Wendell pays that tax.

Fiscal Governance

- Wake County Commissioners approve the fire tax district allocations each budget year.
- Fire departments prepare budgets, and submit them to the Budget Committee of the Wake County Fire Commission.
- These budgets consist of operating costs, such as salaries and benefits for personnel, monthly operation expenses, fuel and utilities, etc.
- The Budget Committee works with both the fire chiefs and the county staff to create an overall Fire Tax District Budget that meets everyone's needs.
- The budget is sent to the Fire Commission, for recommendation to the County Commissioners.
- County Commissioners are empowered to approve/deny/change the budget, beyond what the Budget Committee and/or Fire Commission recommends.

Two Budgets

- There are really two budgets each fiscal year.
- Operating Budget, such as salaries and benefits, operating expenses, fuel and utilities, etc.
- Capital Improvement Projects (CIP), such as equipment, vehicles, and facilities.

Fiscal Goals

- County Commissioners have set as priority that the annual Fire Tax District Budget be "balanced, sustainable," and reflect current priorities of the county.
- Thus, budgeted expenditures are balanced against realistic assumptions of growth (and future revenues).
- But also including the money needed for capital improvement projects (equipment, vehicles, facilities), both for payment of debts and planned expenses.
- And without changes to the fire tax rate itself. E.g., no raising of fire tax rates.

Lack of Standards

- The current fiscal process doesn't have a defined funding model.
- Missing are "standards of coverage" that can be applied to all districts, to all departments, for equalized/level decision-making.
- Thus, the budget committee and county staff are limited in their ability to make targeted decisions in cost containment.
- Thus, for this budget year, the budget committee declined to make line-item changes, and instead suggested per-department reductions in funding, with the department itself allowed to make the line-item/specific changes as needed.

The FY15 Budget Recommendations

- [See page three and four of the PDF document](#), for introductory details. Plus the supplementary documents in the PDF packet.

The FY15 Capital Projects

- [See page four of the PDF document](#), for details on what was defunded or moved.

Revenue Limitations

- In FY2015, the county will lose about \$240,000 in revenues. This is expected as one-time loss, due to vehicle property tax collection transferred to the state. This program is called "tax and tag."
- Thus, the coming budget is based on lower revenues than the prior fiscal year's budget.

What's Needed for the Future?

- The current funding model can't be sustained over coming years.
- Expenses continue to exceed revenue.
- Cost savings/cost containment is needed. (Well, that or raise taxes, which isn't an option that's willing to be considered. Or so has been repeatedly expressed.)

How to Contain Costs

Ideas for containing costs in the system of fire departments funded by the Fire Tax District:

- Identify the appropriate number of apparatus for the system, for regions, and for each department or station.
- Identify the appropriate specifications for those apparatus.
- Develop staffing standards for the system. E.g., the minimum (and maximum?) number of firefighters on each apparatus.
- Develop standards for operating expenses for the system.
- Evaluating options for pooling health insurance across multiple departments for better rates.
- Increase the buying of apparatus in bulk quantities on a competitive procurement basis.
- Perform "responsible, collaborative" planning for new fire station locations, and to minimize coverage gaps and overlap, which limits the overall expenses (capital, operating) associated with new stations.

Make Sense?

- What's missing, what's confusing, what's outright wrong?
- If nothing else, [read the original agenda packet](#) for more details, and more elaboration on what I've summarized above.

Every year they have come up with an excuse not to fund new positions. There are some departments that run with two firefighters per shift. When are they going to learn that two firefighters on a truck is not significant. We need more people. The good ole days of people jumping off the tractor or employers letting people off work to run a fire call is over. They need to fund more positions.

Fire bug - 04/21/14 - 21:57

@Fire bug, I doubt anyone will disagree with you but take it a step further. In order to fund those positions, what are you going to cut from the budget? Remember, revenues are decreasing and its doubtful the tax will be increases, so you need to cut your spending to fit the new positions in the budget. So what would you like to do without? Its easy to say we need more positions, but you'll have to give something up to get it. And then, how do you decide who gets the positions? Sure, maybe the department who makes the cuts, but is that truly the greatest area that needs the positions?

Fire fly - 04/22/14 - 01:02

Introducing the Leveraxe

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Found via [this Discovery story](#). Might be old news. Made in Finland. [Here's the product page](#), and with a nifty diagram on the physics behind the thing. Don't tell anyone in the fire service. They might try to introduce a change!