

# Who's Protecting Whom Volunteer Fire Departments Talk Back

The controversy between the Volunteer Fire Departments (VFD's) and the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners, (Board) has made headlines the past few months. The VFD's are taking this opportunity to tell our story to the tax paying residents of the unincorporated portions of New Hanover County.

## NORTH WILMINGTON - THE TROUBLE SPOT

You are reminded every time a story is aired or printed, that the controversy began when the Board canceled the contract of the North Wilmington Fire Department. North Wilmington was a bad actor among the counties eight VFD's. In an apparent act of spite they choose to dispose of their equipment to fire departments outside of New Hanover County. This act was performed not only at the dismay of the Board, but also of the remaining seven VFD's.

## WHAT DID THE COUNTY REALLY LOSE AT NORTH WILMINGTON?

The Board and the Morning Star News have continually pounded away at you, the taxpayers, about the thousands of dollars that were lost from the North Wilmington "give away." As of this date, neither has presented any actual figures to show the amount of loss.

We quote former Fire Commissioner Frederick Worth from his letter to editor in the Morning Star on 8/19/93, "The two major fire trucks that North Wilmington 'gave away' had a combined market value of about \$100,000 and outstanding debt on those vehicles of \$113,573, or a net negative value to New Hanover County of more than \$13,000..." In addition some equipment they disposed of was not purchased with tax funds. So where is the big loss?

## ABOUT THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE

The Volunteer Fire Service in New Hanover County was organized in the early 50's by concerned citizens of this rural coastal county. The Departments were eventually incorporated as not-for-profit organizations. Funding was scarce in those days with financial assistance coming from the members' own pockets, donations from taxpayers and through the hard work of the volunteer's fund raising efforts such as: fish fries, barbecues, picture taking, rummage sales and in short, from much hard work on low profit events.

The hard earned money was then funneled into the Departments to provide fire protection for the communities they served.

The first funding from the County came in the mid 50's at a grand sum of \$50 per month to help in maintaining equipment.

Over the past 40 years, hundreds of thousands of hard volunteer hours, in addition to hundreds of thousands of non-tax dollars, were spent in building, purchasing and maintaining the fire stations and apparatus. Many of the original stations and equipment are still in service today. This is a testimony to the quality of the efforts the volunteers have expended to "PROTECT AND SERVE" their communities.

## WHO ARE THE VOLUNTEERS?

Who are those volunteer firefighters and what are they about? The volunteer firefighter may be an auto mechanic, a business leader, a factory worker, a preacher, a college student, but most of you know them best as the person next door.

The volunteer firefighter is a conscientious, dedicated, unselfish taxpayer helping to "PROTECT AND SERVE" his/her community. In 1992 the volunteers in New Hanover County sacrificed over 16,000 hours of their personal time in training, drills and meetings to

## "PROTECT AND SERVE" their communities.

In addition they put in tens of thousands of hours responding to over 800 alarms and conducting fire ground operations.

Training is a high priority in the fire service. Each firefighter is required to complete a minimum of 36 hours a year of retraining. Most firefighters put in many more hours than that to keep their skills sharp. Many are certified "firefighters" by the N.C. Fire & Rescue Commission. Others have completed training up to and including instructor level.

## VOLUNTEERISM - THE HEART OF AMERICA

Volunteerism has been the heart of this country since its founding days. The organized volunteer fire department has been a part of this nation's history ever since the first permanent fire department was established in 1736 in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin.

Today's volunteer firefighters continue to keep alive a tradition of non-paid public service to their communities. The current Board through its actions may be striking a deadly blow to volunteerism in New Hanover County. A blow that will silence a tradition with the resulting costs being passed onto you, the taxpayer.

All in the name of protecting you, the taxpayers, from those 221 community minded dedicated volunteer firefighters who make up the volunteers in the seven VFD's in New Hanover County.

These men and women risk their lives or possible personal injury every time they respond to a call to "PROTECT AND SERVE" their communities and who do it all for nothing and ask for nothing in return, except the opportunity to continue to serve their communities. These men and women are also taxpayers in New Hanover County

and have a vested interest in seeing that the tax dollars they are trusted with are spent wisely.

## THE CONTROVERSY OWNERSHIP OF EQUIPMENT

In the past if a VFD were to cease to operate they would have to follow the state laws on dissolution of non-profit volunteer fire departments and their respective by-laws as required by the state law.

In North Wilmington's case they had no dissolution clause in their by-laws but did follow state law. They just chose to give their equipment to VFD's in other counties. The Board is saying that in the future any equipment brought with fire tax moneys be returned to the county fire district upon termination of the contract.

Keep in mind that the contract clearly states that the VFD's are independent contractors. There is no mistake in the language. It insulates the county from liability for the departments they seek to control. How many contractors who do work for the county and are paid with taxpayer's money have to return their equipment at the end of the job? Would you work for the county as an independent contractor with such a provision in your contract? Not many would. Is this the benchmark for future contracts between the county and contractors? Or is the fire service just being treated differently?

Either party may terminate the contract at anytime with 90 days notice. This enables the Board to control the assets of the VFD's and then at anytime with only 90 days notice they could put the VFD's out of business and start a paid county fire department at great expense to the taxpayers.

The dispute is that we want to maintain ownership as we have in the past. Much of the equipment now in use for fire service was purchased without the use of county tax funds. Shouldn't the VFD's be entitled to replace the equipment bought

with private funding and used to protect our communities? It was worn out serving the county, why not replace it. Should the VFD's lose their equity because of a once in a lifetime happening? (When was the last time you heard of a fire department going out of business?)

Once the county has this language in the contract they would be able to terminate the low cost option offered by the VFD's in favor of an expensive totally paid county fire department. Your current fire tax is 2.5 cents per \$100 of evaluation. An estimate of tax for a paid department would be 10 cents or more per \$100 of evaluation. An increase in your tax rate of 400% or more.

The VFD's currently have a membership of 221 firefighters working out of seven stations with over 32 pieces of equipment. Their personal services cost you nothing. Paid personnel replacing the volunteers will carry a heavy price tag. A price tag you, as a taxpayer, will have to underwrite.

## FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING

The VFD's have been providing the Board with a yearly accounting of expenditures made with county

## DONATION APPROVAL

After much discussion the Board was concerned about donations of real property that might be presented without an environmental assessment being made. We agree wholeheartedly with that concept. We do not want someone who might have environmentally unsound property to donate it to a VFD which would then have to pay to have it cleaned up. We would not want that for ourselves or for the County. Imagine someone donating a piece of property with a value of around \$5000 but costing \$100,000 to clean up.

## LAST NEGOTIATION SESSION

The last session held between the Board and The VFD's received a lot of attention. The Star News accused the Board of "stacking the committee two to one against the public" when two Commissioners were appointed to meet with four representatives from the VFD's to negotiate a settlement to the contract dispute.

The real scoop: when the four VFD representatives arrived they were greeted by (2) two Commissioners, (2) two County Attorneys, the County Manager and the County Emergency Management Coordinator. That makes 6 vs. 4 on our calculator or about 1.5 to 1 against the

county did not properly account for fire tax money for several years and then when they realized their mistake, the unappropriated fund suddenly received a windfall.

Do you have any idea of what a little over \$1.3 million in a surplus account is to a County Commissioner? It spending time!! Which is exactly what they are doing. The money collected from the fire tax was suppose to be used for fire suppression activities of the VFD's. Quote from the Morning Star News 7/19/93 on this issue "Now some are sulking because they want the Commissioners to give them every cent of the fire taxes paid by residents who live outside the city".

Sulking? Hardly! Protecting the tax dollars of the taxpayers, most definitely. In this case we are being more of a watchdog of your tax monies than the Board. The Board has expanded the definition of fire suppression to include fire prevention via the Fire Code Enforcement Division and the Forestry Service. We took our own dictionary and we can make a case for the Forestry Service being involved in fire suppression, but not the Fire Code Enforcement Division. Their activities are not of a fire suppression nature.

## WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN?

The Board is using money from this fund to purchase a new radio tower, at a cost of \$250,000. Besides the county fire service this tower will service many other users, including the city of Wilmington, yet the county fire service is expected to fund the entire project via the fire tax and the unappropriated fund balance.

The VFD's feel that to protect the taxpayers, funding should be based on a user fee and not derived solely from the fire tax. [ missing sentence ]

in agreement on that. we disagree on where the money should come from to pay for the project.

Future radio requirements for a state of the art 800 mhz frequency radio system for the fire service is expected to cost around \$700,000. In 1993 - 94 the Board is going to fund the Fire Code Enforcement Division to the tune of \$172,248 and the Forestry Services at \$57,068. Both the Fire Code Enforcement Division and Forestry Service were previously paid out of the general fund.

What will happen when the Board spends all of the surplus money in the unappropriated fund? Logic tells us that they will have to either increase the fire tax or the general tax to continue funding these projects, plus the Code Enforcement Division and Forestry Service. Thus you have your hidden tax increase. Services today, taxes tomorrow.

An what about the VFD's and their need to replace old equipment with more modern equipment to provide the best protection for our taxpayers. This is where the unappropriated funds should be used. To enhance the fire-fighting capabilities of the seven departments. The Board keeps reminding us that the county is growing and the needs are changing. With growth will come the need for newer and better firefighting equipment. Isn't that what your fire tax money should be used for?

Think about it, we have! The VFD's are only asking that the fire tax funds be used for what the special fire tax district was established for: to provide fire protection to the taxpayers in the unincorporated portions of New Hanover County through the VFD's. In this case who is being more responsible with your tax dollars?

## DO WE REALLY NEED MORE GOVERNMENT?

As the Board continues to take its hard line with the VFD's it becomes apparent that they may

have a bigger vision in mind. Is your fire protection going to be sacrificed for the political ambitions of a few? Is consolidation of city and county disguised somewhere in these issues? We hope not.

The VFD's are just as concerned with the spending of county tax dollars as the County Commissioners are, perhaps more so as we are taxpayers also. Those increased taxes show up in our tax bills too. We are accountable to the taxpayers in our communities. We make sure that we spend their tax dollars wisely.

The Board claims they are taking this hard line to protect the taxpayers. Protect you from whom? From the VFD's who will be at your home on a moments notice to try and prevent you from losing everything you have worked so hard for and even perhaps your life or the life of one of your family members. Do they really need to protect you from us?

What will they be up to next? One sure thing you can count on is: when you dial 911 for a fire emergency we will be there. If the VFD's are trusted enough to protect your homes and lives, with proper accounting can we not be trusted with your tax dollars.

During this contract process we have been called many names by both the Board of Commissioners and the Morning Star. It is hard to imagine how dedicated public servants who donate their personal time and risk their lives to "PROTECT AND SERVE" the communities in which they live can be treated so harshly by their elected representatives and our own local newspaper. We are citizens and taxpayers in this community first and firefighters second.

We provide a very valuable service with no compensation. [ missing sentence ]

We do this out of a sense of community spirit and in an effort to give something back to our communities. Our generosity allows our elected leaders more money to use for other pressing social problems.

Is there something wrong in our wanting to stand up and be heard? To defend something that we believe is right. Who is the resident fire expert on the Board of Commissioners? Which one of them knows how the department's operate or how the equipment operates? When was the last time a County Commissioner set foot in one of the fire stations? How can they work with us, when they don't know who we are? Are not our goals mutual and for the betterment of our communities and our county?

We urge you to write or call your county commissioners to express your views on these subjects. When you need the services of the VFD's we respond on a moments notice to your call for help. We need your help now. Please take five minutes of your time to protect a valuable asset to your community.

The Volunteer Firefighters of New Hanover County thank you for taking the time to read about our views of the controversy. Its a shame that the reporting on these issues is so biased that we have to reach out to you in this way. This advertisement costs \$2,920.56 and was paid for with private funds from the VFD's.

In recent years the Volunteer Fire Departments have done a poor job of keeping in touch with our communities. Each department in the county is currently looking at ways to keep you, the public, informed on our activities.

This message is brought to you by the New Hanover County Volunteer Fire Service. As always we thank you for your past and future support.



tax dollars. The Board has requested that we now give them that accounting using specific computer software and at more frequent intervals.

To be specific they want a quarterly report on disk within forty-five (45) days of the VFD's receipt of the county's quarterly payment. The VFD's have no problem with accounting for expenditures and have agreed to this new provision of the contract.

This provision will, however, cost as the VFD's will have to contract with an accounting firm to perform the service.

The VFD's, do not agree that they need to provide the Board with an accounting of receipts or expenditures made from private donations or fund raisers. This is not an unreasonable request on the part of the VFD's. This money was often used to enhance equipment owned by the Department to support fire suppression activities. Many of the enhancements make it possible for the firefighters to work more safely at the scene of an emergency or provide better services to the community. Should the volunteers continue to pay for enhancements out of their private funds if they do not own the equipment?

firefighters.

The opening remarks from the Board were, "We just want you to know that we are in the drivers seat". After a fruitless hour with little discussion the VFD representatives left the meeting. A Commissioner questioned the sincerity of the VFD's in the Morning Star on 8/18/93 and referred to their walking out of the negotiations as "childish."

The VFD representatives did not act in a childish manner. They left because there was no negotiation taking place by the County. No one ever questions our sincerity when we respond in a professional manner to a house on fire. Why would it be in question now? We are quite sincere in protecting our community and our equipment.

The VFD's came as they said they would, the Board did not. Where is the trust? Can you count on the Commissioners to keep their word? This is but one example of the numerous attempts to negotiate in good faith. All we heard is that the Board is in the "Drivers Seat."

## UNAPPROPRIATED FUNDS

While not a contract item this is a real interesting issue that reeks of hidden tax increases for county taxpayers. We won't bore you with how the