

LIST FIRE, RESCUE OPTIONS

Commissioners Grapple With 'Touchy' Subject

BY SUSAN USHER

Brunswick County commissioners began grappling last week with a touchy question held at bay for some time by their predecessors because they saw no clearcut solution: how to equitably support fire and rescue service in the county.

After meeting twice with Brunswick County Emergency Management Director Cecil Logan, commissioners compiled four or five options last Tuesday night to share with the public before going any further into the subject.

They will go on the road with their ideas in future weeks as each meets with fire and rescue units within their district, a plan first mentioned by Commissioner Herman Love.

The five basic options range from a 1) total county takeover of emergency services to 2) complete withdrawal of county support, or 3) continuing as-is with equal funding for each department regardless of the number of units per electoral district.

Both the extremes may be unrealistic, and the current method doesn't enjoy widespread popularity among commissioners or emergency volunteers. But commissioners said they hope the public either come up with a better idea or react to one of several compromises in between the

two extremes—none of which had the unreserved support of the full board last week.

"There's got to be a better way than what we have today," Chairman Chris Chappell insisted, with general agreement.

Based on his past experience on the amount of political pressure voters can exert on candidates, Chappell, who is serving a four-year term, urged the board to act before the filing period for county commissioner opens in January. Otherwise, he warned, the issue could become a political hot potato as it did in 1984.

The middle-ground proposals?

4) To give each district an equal amount of money and then determine within the district how the money is to be disbursed. One variation calls for distributing 75 percent equally among all departments within the district then allocating the remaining 25 percent on the basis of need and priorities, perhaps by the district's representative acting as fire commissioner or by a district panel.

A possible use, for instance, might be purchase of a ladder truck in an area where high-rise development is strong.

5) Fund the districts at a rate set by the commissioners for one year, then let each district determine for itself whether it needs or wants to tax itself

at a higher or lower rate based on what it needs or can afford.

This idea, which forces citizens to directly share responsibility for the services, met with the warmest across-the-board reception of any proposed.

One variation calls for commissioners to establish service districts and then retain the responsibility of setting the tax rate for each district, based perhaps on public hearings. Another calls for district-by-district referenda on formation of special tax districts. Logan said he supported the idea of each district determining its own tax.

Side Issues

While most of their discussion centered on financing, commissioners also touched on related issues ranging from demands on units to what can be expected of a volunteer group in terms of accountability when it receives county support. Commissioner Grace Beasley advocated greater "checks and balances," with units operating under a general set of policies or objectives developed by the commissioners.

Commissioners discussed, favorably, the idea of establishing either a countywide commission or district fire and rescue advisory committees that include not only fire and rescue volunteers, but members

of the local business community as well.

Logan said the average fire department has an annual operating budget of about \$27,000, excluding other items such as liability insurance.

Between the rising cost of equipment, problems in staffing squads during the daytime and increasingly demanding certification and education requirements, indicated both Logan and County Manager Billy Carter, a nationwide transition has begun away from volunteer provision of fire and rescue services toward professional, paid units. Carter predicted a similar trend in Brunswick County based on changes statewide and the county's increasingly urban profile. Already, Logan said, local rescue squads are discussing the need for hired day help.

But both Carter and Logan stressed the high quality and dedication of local volunteers.

"In an emergency they're the best-working people I have ever seen in my life," said Logan. Carter added, "You can't beat 'em."

Just as commissioners haven't agreed, the volunteers have divided among themselves over previous county attempts to arrive at a fair and equitable means of supporting the units. They also have been unable to come up with a workable solution of their own.

Past Proposals

Previous county funding proposals have considered—without satisfaction—factors and combinations of factors such as housing counts, permanent and seasonal population figures, square mileage and units per district.

While each district has approximately the same number of voters, the number of housing units, total population and size vary considerably, as do the number of fire and rescue units serving each district.

Commissioners' decisions in previous years to grant additional funds to Leland, the sole provider located in District 5, met with strong opposition from other departments. Last year each unit was to get \$10,000. But commissioners ended up allocating Leland Fire, Leland

Rescue and Tri-Beach VFD \$10,000 each in additional funds.

Leland Fire and Rescue are the only units now in District 5, for instance, while four fire departments and two rescue squads call District 1 home. Supply VFD's rated service district straddles three electoral districts.

Issue 'Emotional'

Of the options discussed Monday, all generally accepted the idea of letting each district decide how much it would spend on fire and rescue.

Beasley, Rabon, Poole and Love also liked other variations of district-based distribution, while Chappell said he liked their idea but that "it can't work that way" because volunteers get emotional about the concept of equality. He said it boiled down to each unit wanting the same amount of money as every other.

"You have to do it direct—to the departments," he said. He also said the decision on how to fund couldn't be made by the fire and rescue commission, which by charter is composed of volunteers themselves, but must be "dictated" by the county commissioners.

"It has been nothing but emotional since I've been here and before," he explained, stressing again the need for action before the start of filing season. "If you don't do it this year, you will set no policy."

Whatever system they choose, cautioned County Manager Billy Carter, the commissioners must "be consistent; don't let it break down."

Priorities

Commissioner Beasley also broached the problem of volunteer rescue units providing non-emergency transport that puts a strain on their ability to meet emergency needs. Some county units have restricted themselves to emergency calls only, she said.

Possibly charging for rescue service as a way to recoup partial expenses was also suggested, with support from both Logan and Commissioner Herman Love.

Liability

Along with the question of accountability, a question of liability arose. County Attorney David Clegg said the county presently may be

vulnerable to lawsuits stemming from incidents involving fire and rescue units, though it has little control of their operations.

In funding them, he continued, "we're tacitly approving everything they do."

Typical suits being filed more and more frequently statewide relate to malpractice or delayed response.

Other Interviews

Commissioners concluded their series of interviews with department heads Monday night, meeting with Management Support Supervisor Julie Wallace, Tax Administrator Boyd Williamson, Building and Grounds Superintendent R.C. Dixon, Veteran's Service Officer Jess Parker and Housekeeping Director Eloise Russ. On Monday they will arrange a time to meet with both Mrs. Russ and County Manager Billy Carter concerning a letter appraising her performance.

They voted to spend \$1,300 from contingency to join New Hanover and Columbus counties in co-hosting a shrimperoo for legislators and Council of State members in Raleigh in late April. The session will provide a chance to meet and lobby with legislators. The amount paid by each county was based on population, with Brunswick contributing the least, Carter said.

In earlier sessions they:

- Clarified and modified their new residency policy to require, effective immediately, that all new county employees must establish legal residency within the county by the end of their first six-months, the typical length of probation. Those employees who presently live outside will be allowed to continue doing so.
- By County Manager Billy Carter's estimate, nine persons will be affected. A majority of members agreed it isn't fair to make the requirement retroactive, though it may be legal.

- Agreed to put a letter in his personnel file recognizing Planning Director John Harvey's administrative abilities while serving as Assistant County Manager and reassured him that his reassignment to planning only was not a demotion, but rather a setting of priorities.

County, Ocean Isle Negotiate New Water Service Agreement

BY SUSAN USHER

Ocean Isle Beach will be allowed to temporarily continue using its own water system under a county water service contract approved last week by the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners.

Chris Chappell, chairman of the board, said he thinks the contract is mutually beneficial.

"It can be beneficial for both parties," he said. "This was the best route for the county to take."

"We need to call water. We expect Ocean Isle Beach to—and hopefully it will—use our water. I expect it to be used during off-season."

In turn the county can rely on Ocean Isle for backup water for its customers in case of a "catastrophic failure" of part of its system, for example, if the line across Lockwood Folly River were to break.

The previous board of commissioners had rejected in mid-July 1984 a similarly amended contract that proposed to allow Ocean Isle the right to use its own system "at its discretion."

At that time, Ocean Isle Beach Water Commissioner said the county didn't understand the town's position.

"We want to have county water and they need us as a customer, but they're going to have to do better than that," he had told The Beacon. "It can't be all one way."

He said the town needed control of its valve, especially during construction of the town's new high-rise bridge, when he said Ocean Isle would have to rely on its island wells for water. Williamson said he would want Ocean Isle to sign a county water agreement only if it could retain the right to use its water anytime it chooses—such as after the tourists have left and winter demand is low, or at such time as the county could supply all the town's seasonally fluctuating water demand. He said he didn't want the town to have to buy county water in the winter while having to maintain its half-million dollar investment in 14 wells as backup for the county.

Using the town's own well when it chooses was not an option in the standard contract offered to all three towns approximately one year ago and accepted by the towns of Shallotte and Sunset Beach. The other towns agreed to shut off their system and buy only county water, but to maintain the systems so that they could be used for backup to the county supply at least until the transmission lines for the Malmo water plant are completed.

Commissioners approved the latest version unanimously about 11 p.m. last Tuesday night. It had already been signed by Ocean Isle Beach Mayor LaDane Ballington.

Because it had been agreed by the towns during earlier water contract negotiations with the county that they would all "be fed from the same spoon" as requested by Ocean Isle Beach Water Commissioner Odell

Williamson, the amended contract has also been offered to the town of Shallotte. Town aldermen discussed the contract briefly last Wednesday night and expect to take it up again at their next meeting later this month.

"It says we can cut our pumps back on," Mayor Beamon Hewett told the board.

The remark prompted Alderman Paul Wayne Reeves to reply, "I guess we can mix water," a reference to a previous county resolution.

But Hewett warned that townspeople have become accustomed to the quality of water provided by the county, which has a lower rust content.

Shallotte had projected fiscal year 1984-85 water usage at 31 million gallons. In seven months' time it has used 21 million and has a new year-long projection of 36 million gallons. Usage averaged three million gallons in July, August and September, December; 3.5 million in October and 2.25 million in November.

"Our good friends to the south negotiated this contract. That's what brought it about," Hewett said.

"It's something to think about," he advised the five aldermen. "Talk to your neighbors, talk to your friends." He said he thinks the town will be expected to sign the new contract even if it chooses not to cut on its pumps.

The new contract would not apply to Sunset Beach, since later in its negotiations the county bought the Sunset Beach system to avoid having to build a parallel transmission main through the town.

Under the amended contract Ocean Isle will not be charged a tap-on fee.

The county retains the right during periods of peak usage to cut back delivery to the town and call upon the

town to activate its own water system in order to furnish water on demand to the town's customers. And, upon the county's request, Ocean Isle will activate its system up to full capacity to furnish water to its own customers until such time as the county completes construction of the transmission lines along U.S. 17 and N.C. 87 and they are in use.

In the event of "catastrophic failure of part of its water system," the county could also call on Ocean Isle to activate its system to full capacity to furnish water not only to its customers but to other county customers as well.

That provision is not tied to completion of the transmission lines on U.S. 17 and N.C. 87.

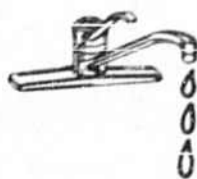
While the county water plant on N.C. 211 is expected to be taxed to capacity during the peak of the summer 1985 season, the county still is seeking additional water customers to help cover debt retirement costs on Phase II of the system, which it must begin paying in 1986.

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