

**MINUTES OF A
SPECIAL BUDGET WORK SESSION
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
MARCH 10, 2022**

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners met in a Special Budget Work Session on March 10, 2022, 1:00 p.m., Justice and Administration Building, Room A201, 401 Grindstaff Cove Road, Sylva, North Carolina.

Present: Brian McMahan, Chairman
Boyce Deitz, Vice Chair
Mark Jones, Commissioner
Tom Stribling, Commissioner
Gayle Woody, Commissioner

Don Adams, County Manager
Heather C. Baker, County Attorney
Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to the Board
Darlene Fox, Finance Director

Chairman McMahan called the meeting to order. He stated that the focus of the meeting would be emergency services. The Board would hear requests from various departments within the county.

(1) GLENVILLE-CASHIERS RESCUE SQUAD: Jeremy Stewart, EMS Director; Jeff Stewart, Chief; Amanda Owen, Chair; Nate Turner, Member; and Jim Huffman, Member, were present for this item.

Mr. Stewart presented:

(a) EMS Contract – Pay Request: The Glenville-Cashiers Rescue Squad was contracted to provide 9-1-1 ambulance coverage to the southern end of the county. They currently had 17 full-time employees and roughly 13 part-time employees who filled in when needed. Of the 17 full-time employees, they had one EMS Director, four Senior Medics and 12 others. The Senior Medics were classified as both supervisors and FTOs. The Senior Medics had an average of over 24 years of experience and the rest of the employees had an average of 10.7 years of experience. The crews worked a 24/72 shift, which meant that three weeks out of the month they acquired eight hours of standard overtime and had a short week only logging 24 hours. They had two trucks on 24 hours a day. The main station was located at 79 North Norton Road and they rented a small cottage near the planned site for Station 2 on Highway 64 East, to provide a faster response time to other parts of the district.

Their district covered approximately 150 square miles, including from the Macon County Line to the Transylvania County Line and from the South Carolina State Line to the Power House on 107 North. They also had to go into South Carolina to get to part of the district around White Water Falls. They took transports from Highlands-Cashiers Hospital to other facilities, when it was appropriate and never accept one when they already had a truck out to ensure that their district was covered.

Last year they ran 996 calls, which was not as many as other agencies; however, their transport times tend to be longer. They transported to multiple hospitals in the area, depending on patient needs and where they were closest. They transported to Highlands-Cashiers Hospital, Transylvania Regional, Angel Medical Center, Harris Regional and Mission when it was needed for trauma, stroke and cardiac issues. They utilized medical helicopters when necessary and when they were available to better patient outcomes.

They required that their employees were or became paramedics. If they were not a paramedic when hired, it was a condition of their full-time employment that they become a paramedic. They did this to ensure that the community received the best care possible in all situations. They strived to provide patients and the community with the best care possible. Their goal was to treat everyone like family and how they would want their families to be treated.

The EMS budget covered payroll, medical supplies, medications, the equipment they carried to provide care and even fuel to run the trucks. Their EMS did not receive any other funding to assist with these costs. Their budget was everything that it took to provide 9-1-1 services to the southern end of the county. The county provided two ambulances and the Rescue Squad provided two more to ensure that when trucks were needed, they were ready to run calls.

Their current starting paramedic pay was \$16.00 per hour, which they wanted to increase to \$19.20 to be the same of as other area agencies. They also wanted to increase their employees based on years of service. They currently had two Senior Medics with over 30 years of experience and service to the agency. By adding this step program, they would be able to pay based on years of service, making it easier to retain employees.

Currently they did not offer any form of retirement for their employees. They were requesting the funds to start a 5% 401K for their employees. This, along with the projected raises, would help recruit and maintain employees in the coming years. In the last five years they had a 50% turnover rate within their agency. They knew that this was an issue that many agencies faced. For them, in most cases, they were leaving for jobs with higher pay and more benefits. By adding a 401K and increasing pay to compete with other agencies, they would be able to retain experienced employees to provide the best care to the community.

In total, they were asking for \$289,676 to be added to the budget to increase employee pay to be comparable to other agencies and add 401K for employees.

Position	Number of Employees	Years of Experience
EMS Director	1	24
Senior Medics	4	24.25
Paramedic	10	10.7
EMT-Advanced	1	1
EMT	1	1

Mr. Turner presented:

(b) Facility Need: In 2016, a request was made to the county and approval was given for a new facility near the Crossroad in Cashiers. Unfortunately, legal issues developed and this was put on hold. The lawsuit was now settled and titles were clear.

Many new homes were being built, tourism was increasing and an increasing number of people had decided to make the Cashiers area their place of full-time residency. This resulted in an increased demand for their services. A recent study by a consulting firm, ULI Advisory Service, predicts that this growth would continue. The demand for their services would only increase in the future.

The Glenville Cashiers Rescue Squad was preparing to build a substation on US 64 East in Cashiers in order to meet the increased demand for services from the community. He presented pictures and plans for a proposed four-bay substation with accommodations to house an EMS crew in addition to those at the main station. The substation would cut EMS response time in the 107 South, 64 East and West areas and place vital rescue equipment in those areas.

The estimated cost of the building was \$4.5 mil. They did have a \$335,000 note on the purchase of the property, which would get rolled into the loan for an estimated total of \$4.9 mil. They would have more firm numbers in June. They had been in discussions with First Citizens Bank about a construction loan, but the exact terms had not been finalized.

They currently had one paid rescue squad employee. With the addition of the new substation, they felt it was imperative that once the station was completed, the squad would need to acquire a second paid employee. Their future goal was to have four paid employees.

Mr. Adams stated that previously, the original amount that was approved by county for this project was \$2.3 mil. The new request was for \$4.9 mil.

Chief Stewart presented:

(c) Sewer Issue: There was an existing sewer issue they were planning to fix at the current facility. They had permission from the School Board to hook up to the new sewer system. Due to delays in completing the treatment plant at Blue Ridge School, years had passed since they had an engineer design the sewer connection plans. They were having the plans reevaluated and were awaiting an estimate for this project.

Mr. Adams stated that their existing facility was located near Blue Ridge School. The county worked with the schools and obtained a CDBG Grant to replace the water tower at the school with a pump system to provide water to school. They also came in and built a 10,000 gallon per day treatment package for sewer. The primary purpose was to serve the school, but they sized it well enough to meet the needs of the school in the future and potential needs from the Rescue Squad.

He requested the Rescue Squad go back to Victor Lofquist, the engineer for the facility to discuss reserving capacity. The contract would have to be worked out between the school system and the Rescue Squad regarding capacity.

In the long-term, if the Rescue Squad worked out the agreement with the schools for sewer capacity, there would be additional conversations about the modifications needed to the facility for the sleeping quarters to be utilized. This would be an additional request brought back before the Board in the future.

Informational item.

(2) GRANT MATCH REQUESTS FOR FIRE DEPARTMENTS:

(a) Qualla Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department: Chief Kent Moore provided a copy of the grant application to the Board. He stated that with the grant funds, Qualla would purchase three full sets of new FireDex turnout gear. They would also purchase a new turnout gear washer and dryer. The total amount applied for on the grant would be \$22,569.50. The total out of pocket for the department would be \$11,284.75.

Their department decided to shift focus for this grant to firefighter health and safety. Cancers were caused by carcinogens that firefighters were exposed to in high heat and smoke filled environments in the line of duty. The purchase of the washer and dryer would offer an opportunity for members to properly and efficiently care for their gear as well as removing toxins that could expose them or their families if the gear was stored inside a vehicle or home.

Informational item.

(b) Canada Volunteer Fire Department: Chief Terry McCall provided a copy of the grant application to the Board. He stated that with the grant funds, Canada would purchase six Air Packs for replacement. They were trying to upgrade so that all their packs would be the same. The total amount applied for on the grant would be \$60,001.80. The total out of pocket for the department would be \$30,000.00.

Chairman McMahan stated that the company most departments used in the past for the Air Packs went out of business, so they no longer manufactured parts needed. All of the packs that departments all across the southeast purchased were obsolete because they were no longer able to get parts. This was why they needed to upgrade to a new manufacturer.

Informational item.

(c) Savannah Volunteer Fire Department: Chief Floyd Green provided a copy of the grant application to the Board. He stated that with the grant funds, Savannah would purchase: turnout gear; turnout gear washer and dryer; fire hose; and Thermal Imager Cameras. The cameras could save lives by detecting where a fire may be in a structure fire. They all worked together and would use the cameras wherever they were needed in the county.

He thought if a person was going to volunteer their time for the county, they needed to take the best care of them they could. The total amount applied for on the grant would be \$54,608.00. The total out of pocket for the department would be \$27,304.00.

Informational item.

(d) Balsam-Willets-Ochre Hill Volunteer Fire Department: Assistant Chief Chuck Irwin provided a copy of the grant application to the Board. He stated that with the grant funds, Balsam would purchase SCBA Bottles. They had 47 total in their department and 40 of the bottles would expire in the next year. The current bottles had a 15-year life span and the new ones would have a 30-year life span.

Also, they would purchase 28 SCBA Face Masks to bring them up to the 2018 Standards. They would also purchase one SCBA Spare Bottle to replace them one that would expire in the next year. The total amount applied for on the grant would be \$58,900.00. The total out of pocket for the department would be \$29,450.00.

Chairman McMahan stated that the bottles were made out of fiber that was spun around a cylinder to create a much lighter bottle as opposed to the traditional metal bottles that added extra weight to the firefighter.

Informational item.

Mr. Adams stated that this time was offered to the fire departments to help with the match for personal protective equipment. The total 50% match of what was presented to the Board was \$98,039.00.

Commissioner Deitz stated that there were four requests with three of the requests being for the maximum amount. Qualla's request was for less than the maximum.

Trevor Sutton, Qualla Fire and Rescue Department, stated he could provide an explanation. There were other grants within the state system that fire departments could utilize. They were fortunate to receive the State Forest Service Grant. Because of that, they had money tied up in other grants prior to this State Fire Grant opportunity. They already had the cap they could afford to spend out of pocket before they knew about the matching funds from the county.

Informational item.

(3) **COUNTY FUNDING FOR FIRE AND RESCUE OPERATIONS:** Ms. Fox presented:

Total Fire Operations	\$2,658,559.00
Fire Tax - Cashiers-Glenville and Highlands	\$1,875,170.00
Total for Fire Operations	\$4,533,729.00
Ambulance/Rescue Total	\$3,073,475.00
All Emergency Service Operations Total	\$7,607,204.00

Informational item.

(4) TOWN OF SYLVA FIRE OPERATIONS: Mr. Paige Dowling, Sylva Town Manager and Mike Beck, Sylva Fire Department Chief, were present for this item.

Chief Beck presented: Sylva Fire Department: Split Volunteer and Paid Fire Department:

(a) Sylva Insurance District:

- County Protected
- Sylva
- Dillsboro
- Webster

(b) Automatic/Mutual Aid:

- Centrally located to all automatic aid departments (Balsam, Savannah, Cullowhee).
- Mutual Aid to Qualla, Cashiers and Canada.

(c) Volunteer Numbers:

- Currently 33 volunteers on the roster.
- 8am-5pm average number of volunteers range from four to ten (includes two paid personnel).
- 5pm-12am average number of volunteers range from five to twelve.
- 12am-8am average number of volunteers range from two to five.
- Structure fires average seven to thirteen volunteers.
- Automatic aid fires average four to eight volunteers.

(d) Call Volume: Staffed vs. Non-staffed:

- Not staffed after 5pm and weekends: 64%
- Monday-Friday 8am-5pm staffed by District Coordinators: 36%

(e) Need for Paid Staff:

- OSHA Standard 1910.134(g) was the National mandate for the “Two-in, Two-out” policy. This mandate required four firefighters to be on scene before an interior fire attack could be made.
- Three firefighters on each shift puts them closer to meeting OSHA 1910.134(g)(4). The fourth firefighter could be the Chief Officers or volunteers.
- Efficiency: Response time would decrease. Necessary equipment and apparatus would quickly leave the station. Currently, it took an average of six minutes for the closest member to leave their house, respond to the station and have apparatus en route.

(f) Other Benefits of Staffed Station:

- Ability to further expand assistance to Harris EMS at all times of the day.
- 500 hydrants in the district could be fully inspected, tested and maintained between the shifts.
- Insurance Rating Improvement. Currently an ISO Class 5. Lower ISO rating decreases insurance premiums for businesses.
- Pre-planning of the 531 commercial buildings in the district.
- Increased training.
- Fire Prevention Education.

(g) Necessary Personnel Budget:

- Total Budget: \$1,393,933
- Cost of Personnel: \$805,255
- Amount needed from county: \$1,171,728

Ms. Dowling stated that Sylva Fire Department’s budget for that fiscal year was \$494,378, with approximately \$200,000 coming from the Town of Sylva and the remaining amount from Jackson County, Dillsboro and Webster. The request was for an additional \$805,255 from the county would be to cover the costs of personnel for 12 full-time employees.

The county already contributed a significant amount to the fire department, which was appreciated. In order to have 12 full-time personnel, the requested in the future would be \$1,171,728, which would continue what the county was currently paying, the cost of personnel and the pay per call.

Mr. Adams stated that the county currently paid:

- Building Loan Reimbursement: \$150,775
- Annual Contribution: \$121,398
- Pay Per Call: \$25,000

The first item the Board would need to decide if it was justified to go full-time. If the Board decided they did need to go full-time and wanted to participate financially, then the conversation would be how they would pay for it. Staff would bring back variations of numbers, but there were two ways to pay for it. One was with General Fund dollars and the other would be with a service tax.

All other fire department's funds, except Cashiers-Glenville and Highlands, came out of the General Fund. If they went in the direction of a service tax, they would have to define the service area. If they taxed the service area directly, they would have to discuss what the tax rate would be. Also, the towns would have to agree to participate in the service area, if they chose that route.

Chairman McMahan stated that as they looked at all of the requests they received that day, that may be a potential conversation they want to have for a total response district that would cover fire, rescue and EMS.

Mr. Adams stated that if the Board wished to pursue a service area, a public hearing would be required and other steps to determine area along with a service area map. The information must be available for one month before the public hearing. They would need to prepare to have meetings in April and make that determination by the first of May, if they wished to move forward with this concept.

Informational item.

There being no further business, Commissioner Jones moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Stribling seconded the Motion. Motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 2:13 p.m.

Attest:

Approved:

Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board

Brian Thomas McMahan, Chairman